

Embers

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by [Vathara](#)

Summary

Dragon's fire is not so easily extinguished; when Zuko rediscovers a lost firebending technique, shifting flames can shift the world...

Notes

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Also: This story is already finished and if you want to read the full version right now, just search it on fanfiction.net. I just post it here on her behalf and also because it is easier to read on AO3 in my opinion. Have fun.

Chapter 1

It was the muffled groan that woke him, in the thin light before dawn.

Enemies? Surrounded? Ambush?

Zuko breathed in silently, deeply, ready to unleash a deadly surprise on anyone who might have succeeded in sneaking up on them-

No one. The Earth Kingdom night was quiet. Just their bare camp out of sight of the road, the annoyingly cheerful chirps of birds, the odd grassy smell of air with no coal smoke or salt in it....

And another sleepy grumble of complaint from Uncle's bedroll.

Zuko let his breath sigh out, flameless, wincing in sympathy. It'd been weeks since Zhao's hired pirates had blown him out of his own ship, and some of his deeper wounds still ached, despite all his uncle's efforts to clean them and keep them from getting infected. Work that had only gotten harder while they were drifting in the ocean without supplies. Fish caught under the raft and water chipped out of stray icebergs only went so far.

And now they were fugitives, sleeping in a brushy hollow without even a fire. If *he* was aching, Uncle was probably dreaming of a long, relaxing soak in a hot spring.

Right. Like the last time turned out so well.

Groaning, Zuko pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to blot out the memory of carting his all-but-naked uncle back to their ship, pulverized earthbenders eating their dust. If he *never* had to see that again, it'd be too soon.

...I'm not getting back to sleep today. Damn it.

He'd never been a heavy sleeper. Not since-

Sleep, and people disappear. Sleep, and the world falls apart, and nothing you do can make it right again, ever....

-Not for a long time. It hadn't been a problem on their ship. Much. Here on the run, though....

A pained grunt. Zuko froze. "Uncle?"

Silence. A sigh. "Old bones, my nephew. Do not worry. I'm sure in the next town, we will find a nice, soft bed." A chuckle. "Or at least a stable. Hay isn't so bad, if it is well-kept."

Uh-huh. The way his luck ran? The next town would be full of Fire Nation soldiers, or rabid Earth Kingdom thugs, or Azula. And if the spirits were in a particularly snippy mood, it'd be all three. "First we have to get to the next town," Zuko said shortly. "Turn over." He wasn't as good as Uncle - no one was, besides Azula and the Fire Lord himself - but he should be able to manage this.

Or at least, if he couldn't, Uncle would just end up with singed clothes. They could deal with that.

Slowly, he rubbed his hands together, palm just brushing palm in a tingling, circular flow. He built the heat carefully; kept it steady as he moved his hands apart, never quite reaching flame....

Fire was good. But sometimes - say, when you were trapped underwater, under *ice* - heat was

better.

Air shimmering around his fingers, Zuko started kneading sore muscles.

"Hmm." Uncle sounded surprised, but not displeased. "Nephew?"

"Tricky," Zuko managed, holding hot-but-not-burning as he searched out knots and strains. If he closed his eyes, he could almost imagine he saw them; muted copper where the body's natural flow of fire should be molten gold. "Not real good at this."

"Ah. Well. Higher, then."

A few minutes, and he had to stop. No breakfast and not enough sleep were making his concentration fray at the edges, and he didn't want to set his uncle on fire.

...Well, not unless that stupid lotus tile went missing again.

Uncle Iroh sat up as he moved away, face thoughtful. "An interesting adaptation of wound treatment, Prince Zuko."

"...It wasn't an adaptation. Much." Zuko stared into the dawn, trying to match the road they were on to memories of Earth Kingdom maps. Maps now lost with his ship, and *damn* Zhao-

"Take my hand!"

Zuko shook his head, trying not to see the anger and horror in those eyes. Who needed any more proof the spirits had it in for him? He couldn't even save an enemy....

"Nephew?"

"Just - something Mom would do," he got out. "When I'd try to keep up with Azula, and - it didn't work." *When I failed again. Painfully.* "Hadn't really thought about it in a while... can we go, already?"

"Ah, so we will eat on the road? Young people, so hasty...." At his glare, Iroh only smiled. "I will be fine, nephew. You did an old man's back a great deal of good."

Nothing else. *Thank Agni.* Relieved, Zuko started striking camp. Mentioning Ursa was always a risk. Mention her, and Uncle might want to *talk* about her. And that just... hurt.

Iroh followed more slowly, breathing a lick of flame at their battered camp pot for a bit of morning tea. Staring into steam, as if it would part like mist to reveal the future. Or the past.

But then again, that was Iroh and tea. Always.

We should have spoken more before my father's death, Ursa. Letting his nephew take the lead, Iroh walked, lost in thought. Keeping pace with far more ease than he had any right to expect, after yet another night sleeping rough. It could simply have been the lingering wellbeing of deep heat; Agni knew, it soothed a multitude of hurts. And yet....

We should have talked, indeed.

But it had never seemed to be the right time. Even from the beginning.

"Prince Iroh, you have to come...."

He'd rolled out of bed on the darkest watch of the night, awakened by one of Lady Ursa's braver attendants. The story had poured out of the maid like storm-water off a roof. Ozai's heir, finally born not at fortunate noon, but at the accursed hour of midnight. Infant and mother both exhausted by the struggle, abandoned by the father-to-be when physicians decreed the child was unlikely to see dawn. Lady Ursa's sudden *blaze* of temper, throwing out useless so-called healers, demanding enough wood brought in to set half the palace ablaze, and then ordering everyone away....

He couldn't blame the staff for their caution. Ozai's marriage, like his own, had been to a daughter of a family known for firebending prowess, the better to ensure strong heirs to Sozin's legacy. And fire drew strength from passion. Lady Ursa might ordinarily be a gentle soul, but if she were... upset....

The door was locked, but he knew ways around that. He entered quietly, wary as if he were sneaking into an enemy fortress.

At least nothing is on fire.

Though considerable ashes had been shoved to one side of the hearth. A small, steady fire still burned on the other, flames bending away to-

Iroh held still, scarcely daring to breathe.

Ursa was seated directly on the stones bordering the fire, heedless of soot and smoke staining her loose robe. Her eyes were closed in utmost concentration, and her hands....

Her hands were wreathed in flames.

Gold. Green. Violet. Like sunlight through spring woods.

Flames she ran first over herself, briefly, breathing in strength. Then, slow and lingering, over the tiny form curled in her lap. Every wash of fire chased a bit more blue from the child's skin, eased his breathing from fitful efforts to more healthy hiccups.

Carefully, fervently glad he was alone, Iroh sank down beside her. If he were fortunate, if this were indeed what it appeared, she would be too deep in the healing trance to notice.

But how can it be? I have seen waterbenders heal, but fire?

At last, a full-throated cry. Ursa opened her eyes, sagging-

He caught them both. "If the crisis has passed, my sister, perhaps you should both be in bed?"

Ursa went white. "You *saw*...."

"A mother caring for her son," Iroh said firmly. And smiled. "So. This is my nephew?"

"Zuko." Her chin lifted, a little color returning to her face. "His name is Zuko."

"Zuko," Iroh nodded. "Lu Ten will be glad to meet his cousin, in the morning." He glanced down into half-closed eyes of bright, true Fire Nation gold-

Gold?

He'd held Lu Ten weeks after his own son's birth, looking into eyes of still-undecided infant blue.

Only months later, with growth and time, should any child show what element they were born to.

"I was born like this, too."

Startled, he looked up at his brother's wife.

"My family wouldn't have mentioned it. Not with Fire Lord Azulon making the arrangements... my mother said it was like trying to hatch a stone." Ursa smiled at her son, bittersweet. "But I was strong enough to live. And so is he."

"So I see." Iroh raised an inquiring brow. "But how?"

"It's an old legend." She glanced up. "He can't know."

No need to ask who *he* was. His brother did not take kindly to secrets. Or to things he had not predicted, and could not control.

"As I will tell my brother," Iroh said firmly, "I have only seen a mother, sitting with her son where a warm fire could do them most good." He gave her his most endearing look. "Yet I cannot deny, it is a technique I would most dearly like to learn."

"I suppose we can try...."

They had, Iroh reflected now, trudging through the dust. Several times. He'd learned to use heat to prevent infection, and help the body heal itself; skills that had become crucial thirteen years later, when royal physicians were certain Zuko would lose his eye and hearing, if not his life.

Still, he could only encourage the body. He'd never been able to mend it, as Ursa had; shaping the very essence of flame into the energy of life itself. And she never had told him what legend had led her teachers to such a rare technique. Though given his travels, and what he had seen, he could guess.

Gold and green and violet, Iroh thought, side-stepping a passing hornet. *Dragon's fire.*

A flame he'd thought Zuko, like himself, had simply proved incapable of using. Or had never had time to learn; his bending had bloomed late - he was such a *small* child - and Ursa had been gone when he was only ten.

You assumed, Iroh scolded himself. *You never asked. You know your brother. Zuko is impulsive, and too quick to anger, but he is not a fool. A healer, as the Fire Lord's heir? Unforgivable.*

Yes. It would be, wouldn't it?

And it was most interesting, how Zuko had reacted to that young healer's apprentice, Song. *Thinking*, for once, even if he'd needed a nudge to get started....

We can't go home. Azula lies like she breathes, but even she would never dare imprison us if it were not the Fire Lord's will.

And once in Azula's hands, his nephew would die. She longed to be the heir; thirsted for it, and Ozai's approval, like travelers thirsting in the desert. Only Zuko's exile - Zuko's *life* - stood between her and all she desired.

He'd seen them battle. Zuko would hesitate. Azula would not.

We cannot go home. But my nephew must realize that for himself.

Of course, what kind of uncle would he be, if he didn't help?

"Uncle?" Under the sedge hat, Zuko was eyeing him with deep, deep suspicion.

Iroh smoothed any hint of plotting into innocent surprise. "I was only considering how we might gain that bed, nephew. And perhaps some supplies as well."

"We're royalty. They should give us what we want!"

...This may take longer than I thought. Though part of that was simply pain and injured pride; his nephew had always been reasonable dealing with their suppliers. If a bit inclined to argue prices down to the bone. Which, given many of those willing to deal with them inflated their demands simply *because* Zuko was exiled, seemed only fair. "To their sworn enemies, Prince Zuko? They may be Earth Kingdom peasants, but they are not fools."

Zuko's fists clenched, daggers of fire blazing before he started, and furtively quenched them.

"But there are ways to ask," Iroh went on easily, as if the slip were unimportant. They were safely unseen, after all... and he knew full well one could only deny the spirits' gifts so long without pain. "And if we have something to barter with, we may fare very well, indeed." He scanned the roadside. "Now, if we can only find some nice, polished rocks...."

"Are you *insane*?"

Hmm. And sometimes his nephew was a little too quick to catch on.

"I can't - they'll catch me - we'll be exposed as Fire Nation and - *nobody's* going to *barter* for us to use *hot rocks* on them-!"

"We can't know until we try," Iroh shrugged. "I found it most worthwhile. And you should know, people see what they wish to see." He brightened. "Ah! I think I see a good one."

"...Please let there not be any poisonous *rocks*."

Pocketing the innocuous quartz pebble, Iroh chuckled ruefully. His nephew had every right to be worried. The fine points of hunting and foraging might not be among their skills, but a crown prince learned of everything Fire Nation mines produced. Including, of necessity, the lovely and lethal ruby arsenic, so horribly known as dragons' blood. "Don't worry. I do know what I am doing, this time."

"I hope so." Quiet; much quieter than he was used to hearing from his impulsive nephew. "You frightened me, Uncle." Zuko swallowed. "Don't do that again. Please."

Longer than I thought, Iroh reflected. *But perhaps, not as long as I had feared.* "I will be careful," he reassured the young prince. "Look! This must be a stream of some kind, when the winter snows melt...."

Stifling a sigh, Zuko left the road to help him hunt pebbles.

Spying another candidate, Iroh smiled as he crouched, listening to grumbled complaints like quiet music. "Rocks... crazy... never going to work...."

Yet he hadn't said *no*. And Zuko would have, if he weren't at least willing to try.

One step at a time.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

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Sometimes, Zuko thought, even the most boring schoolwork paid off.

The Fire Nation usually used coal for fuel. The Earth Kingdom used everything from wood to coal to odd gases that seeped up in rock-salt pits. Given he'd been trained in preparation for conquering more of it, he'd had to know a little about them all.

Which was how he'd noticed a persistent scent of wood smoke, and followed it to a charcoal-burner's mound. Part of which he'd just carefully dug out, constructing a small but thick cup of not-yet-charred wood against the mound's side.

"Really, Prince Zuko, this is unnecessary...."

"I don't use equipment I haven't tested, Uncle." He held out a hand. "Rocks. Now."

"We could heat them by hand. You didn't have to undo a poor woodcutter's hard-"

"Yes, I did!" But he didn't move. Didn't attack. No matter how much he wanted to break *something*, just to loosen some of the knots in his gut. "Uncle, will you just trust me on this?"

Uncle Iroh frowned, but handed over the bag of pebbles.

Finally. Zuko dumped them unceremoniously into his makeshift kiln, punched down flames, and stood back. Waiting.

"The smoke will draw attention," Uncle warned, as flames blazed in the nest of wood. "Whatever you are up to, nephew, it cannot be as crucial as avoiding the notice of-"

Crack.

Zuko let out a breath, suspicions confirmed as more explosive cracks shuddered through smoking wood. A relief, actually. Maybe the universe would settle for this as bad luck, and leave them alone for a while.

Uncle didn't say a word.

He waited until the fire was quiet, and a few minutes more. Damped flames with a push of his hands, and started digging for surviving rocks.

Uncle was *still* quiet, watching over his shoulder. Unreal.

Finally he had the survivors, still hot to the touch. And two half-charred logs, studded with shards of stone like Mai's little knives. "You said that was a stream sometimes," Zuko said bluntly. "I couldn't trust them."

"Water in the rocks," Uncle said slowly, staring at glittering edges. "Yes, of course." He glanced at

Zuko. "How did you know?"

"Zuzu, can you heat these up for me? I want to play a game...."

"Oh look, Zuzu's an earthbender! And he can't even get that right!"

"How do I learn anything?" Zuko said grimly, blowing on pebbles to cool them, before he dropped them back into Uncle's bag. "The hard way."

Don't laugh, Iroh told himself firmly, deliberately ignoring Zuko's trembling hands as they placed warm stones on a cranky blacksmith's back. Most people wouldn't have noticed even a twitch. Indeed, the small crowd of onlookers taking part of their midday break in this inn had seen nothing; they were too curious of strangers, and too incautious, to have held their tongues if they had. But he knew his nephew. More, he'd led men in war for many years. He knew, even if the boy himself did not know, when a young man was heart-wrenchingly *afraid*. Afraid, and ready to run. Or attack, burying the shame of fear in action.

Don't laugh. This is a battle - not of the body, but of the soul. Remember the general you once were, and lead.

So far, his story to the local innkeeper - that they were healer and apprentice, there'd been a Fire Nation raid, how unfortunate, not even time to grab supplies - seemed to be holding up. They'd treated a few other men already; apparently the village healer was up to her elbows in caring for three difficult pregnancies, and these were but simple injuries, left to wait. Though perhaps their patients were also taking advantage of the fact that the strangers *were* refugees, and so all but forced to charge less for any business at all.

It didn't matter. He knew enough battlefield care to pass, as did Zuko. It should suffice, so long as no one asked them anything too complicated.

Or anything at all, at the moment. Fortunately, the blacksmith was lying on an inn bench, unable to see Zuko lower his head and breathe, slow and deliberately even. If there were candles about, Iroh was uncomfortably sure they would have been blazing in time to that rhythm. It was a wonder the inn's hearth wasn't flaring.

Well, perhaps not quite a wonder. Zuko knew they were watched. The young man was careful. Sometimes.

But why is he afraid? Iroh wondered, setting to work on muscles knotted by a long morning pounding iron. *There is no danger here, nothing to fight. We are here to help this man, as we have helped his neighbors-*

Hmm. Aside from his uncle, when was the last time Zuko had helped anyone, without suffering for it?

Our helmsman, in the storm. The Avatar.

Heh. His nephew might think Iroh knew nothing of that little escapade, but he was old, not blind. One day despairing, certain Zhao would take everything he longed for - and the next, simply going to bed? With a great many bruises, no less.

Ah, but I wish I could have seen the look on Zhao's face.

Iroh channeled that amusement into an approving smile as Zuko stepped in and began to work. Careful to make it seem as if the shimmer of heat were from the stones fished in and out of their camp pot on the inn's hearth, and not his hands. "Gently," Iroh instructed, matter of fact as any master to an apprentice. *Act as if this is ordinary, and everyone will believe that it is.* "Always ease the muscles first, to be sure they are not strained further."

"Ha!" their patient rumbled, not quite dislodging smooth stones. "Think I can't take it, old man?"

"You are a veritable wellspring of yang chi, Master Blacksmith," Iroh said cheerfully, waving Zuko back to work when the young man hesitated. "But healing requires balance. So some gentleness is called for."

Advice he would do well to remember himself. That *demonstration*, with the pebbles-

He could have told me. I would have believed him.

Yet, it seemed *Zuko* didn't believe that.

No. It is more than that. Iroh considered Zuko's actions, and their result. *By not explaining, he gained the freedom to act, and so remove the danger to both of us.*

Which meant Zuko had expected to have his concerns dismissed. Though why his nephew would believe anyone would deny the crown prince his right to protect himself-

I am a fool.

Learned the hard way, had he?

Ozai. Or Azula.

The girl, most likely. His brother's cruelty was more likely to be words and fire than tricking a young boy into harming himself. River rocks to explode in an innocent's face - oh yes. That was definitely Azula.

Which meant that he'd set his nephew to work in an inn full of strangers with the memory of Azula's mockery ringing in his head. Oh dear.

Well. At least he has not run yet. Or set anyone on fire.

Still. It would be wise to draw this to a close, while his nephew's nerve still held. Pain and danger, Zuko would face without flinching. The demons of his own mind....

Three years, and I thought I had at least scouted them all. But those years were without Ozai, and without Azula.

My enemy's forces are more deeply entrenched than I ever knew. And far stronger than I had imagined.

As they had been, at Ba Sing Se....

No. I will not lose another son-

"Uncle!" Zuko hissed, elbow jabbing him.

Ah, yes. Better to focus, if he did not wish to lose his nephew right now. "I would advise you take it easy for a few days," he informed the blacksmith as Zuko started packing up. "Or at least, no

more ostrich-horse lifting contests for a while, hmm?" he chuckled. "Better to let them carry you."

A snort of laughter. "Where's the fun in that?"

The hearty backslap that accompanied it was enough to drive most men to their knees; Iroh let himself shift with it, only staggering enough to confirm their watchers' image of him as a lucky, harmless old man. Still smiling, he mentally held his breath; Zuko was twitching, within a heartbeat of attacking the man-

Wrestled down the rage, and stayed still. Though Iroh suspected the rocks in their pot were much, *much* hotter than they should be.

"I thank you for the use of your hearth, madam," Iroh bowed to the openly eavesdropping innkeeper. "But if there is no one else for now, I just remembered some supplies my nephew and I will need for our journey."

"You can come in again before the dinner crowd, cutie," the elderly woman dimpled at him.

"Ah, but you are too kind." Another bow, and he subtly dragged his disbelieving nephew out, pot and all.

A left, two rights, and they were behind the solid wall of a bakery. No houses too close, due to the risk of fire - and no one would be surprised at a few stray drifts of smoke. "Nephew. Breathe."

"Breathe? I don't need to breathe, Uncle! If we've got enough, let's get our supplies and get out-"

"Lee," Iroh said, very deliberately. "I believe, as your master, when I tell you to breathe - you breathe."

Shock, painted on Zuko's face. Betrayal. *Anger-*

Shoulders slumped in resignation, and Zuko breathed.

That won't hold long, Iroh reflected. Attack, and he will fight. It's what he does. What he knows. But if I maneuver elsewhere.... "When I was a younger man, I dealt with soldiers who had once been captured by our enemies. Who had not been... treated well." He grimaced, recalling how he had been then; proud and fierce and not nearly as kind as Zuko likely imagined. "And I did not treat them well. I had not lost what they had lost, and I did not understand."

"Uncle," Zuko said stiffly, "soldiers in the past aren't important. Not compared to soldiers who might be here, right now-"

"They are important," Iroh interrupted. "*You* are important, nephew."

Zuko eyed him warily. "I'm not a soldier, Uncle."

"Not in name," Iroh admitted. "But you were confined, and harmed by those you had no choice but to obey, and unable to free yourself, without aid-"

"Don't talk about my father like that!"

"And when you thought you had won your freedom," Iroh bore brutally on, "your nightmare returned, and threatened you with new chains. I have seen this fear, nephew! I knew it in their hearts. I know it in yours!"

"I'm not afraid of her!"

Quick as a striking snake, Iroh moved. "I am."

Wrapped in his arms, Zuko sputtered incoherently.

"She is skilled, and she is deadly," Iroh said, voice low. "She haunts your mind, and you cannot rest. But you *must*, nephew. Remember when we visited the Northern Air Temple, years ago." Zuko had vowed to search every Air Temple for traces of the Avatar, and his nephew never spoke lightly. But even a scarred, angry teenager had seen the wisdom in keeping Ji the Mechanist's work for the Fire Nation a secret. This was not the first time the pair of them had traveled in Earth Kingdom brown.

Yet that was only hours, to search quietly, Iroh knew. This has been days.

But he could not falter. Zuko needed his confidence, now more than ever. Exile was crushing to the soul; exile with the threat of agonizing death, far more terrifying.

"Lee and Mushi are but simple refugees," he said, voice deliberately steady. "To be always on watch, always searching for an enemy in the shadows - it marks us. And we must be as two leaves in the forest. It is the only way to survive." He held on tight, rubbing at too-thin shoulders. "I am here. I will not abandon you to her again."

"...I'm not afraid of her." A low, bitter whisper.

No, Iroh thought wryly. Not so much as you are of everyone, my nephew.

Not a fear of injury, or death. On the battlefield, his nephew could face any enemy-

Save two.

But to walk among those who might not be your enemies... he'd never had the chance to teach Zuko that. He'd never realized he *had* to.

That ends. Now.

"You should know, nephew," Iroh said matter-of-factly, voice still low, "that what we are doing is one of the most difficult and dangerous tasks in this world. To survive in a nation not your own, among ways and customs foreign to all you know - it is hard. Very hard. I do not believe Azula could do it." He pulled back enough to smile. "But I know you can."

Gold eyes blinked, incredulous and disbelieving. But Zuko did not pull away. "...How?"

"Have you not heard the proverb of the dragon and the mountain? The mountain is strong. It seems invincible. And to many things, it is. But if a fierce enough blow strikes it, it is only rocks and dust." He gripped Zuko's shoulder, light but firm. "The dragon seems weaker. It is mortal; if struck, it bleeds. But the dragon can move, and avoid the blow, and choose its own time to strike."

Good, Iroh thought, feeling Zuko's breathing even out under his hands. The fear is far from dead, but we have weakened it. He is thinking-

"The dragons are dead, Uncle."

Ah. Well. That was an honest objection, given what Zuko knew.

Do I dare? He still loves my brother, and fears him. The risk, if I am wrong....

The cost could be high. But the cost to his nephew, to the world, if he let Zuko fall back into that

pit of awful doubt-

Mentally crossing his fingers, Iroh prayed. "So they said of the Avatar."

Now Zuko did struggle free, shaken. "You *lied* to Grandfather?"

Carefully. Carefully. "The Moon Spirit taught waterbenders, my nephew. Would you have followed Zhao's path, and drawn its blood?"

"No!" Zuko recoiled, horrified. "Is that why he came - and I...." He jerked away, fists clenched.

Iroh stiffened, recognizing the huddled shame, the way Zuko had turned so his scar shrouded any expression. *He never cries. Not since Lady Ursa....*

"Is it my fault she's dead?"

Yue. He'd told his nephew everything, those endless days drifting on the raft. The princess had had a rare courage, to give up her life for her people. It deserved to be remembered. "No," Iroh said firmly. "You did not know Zhao's plan. *I* did not know. I could not stop him in time. Her death was brave, and her own choice. It is not your fault."

"But I'm the one who took the Avatar away." Zuko swallowed dryly. "If he'd been there... if that waterbender hadn't followed me, *she* would have been there, and - if I'd *known*, I would have...."

Iroh kept his voice level, feeling the precipice his nephew stood on. "What would you have done?"

"...I would have waited."

Do not yell at him, Iroh told himself, unable to hide a sigh. *He has been lost a very long time. You cannot expect him to recognize the path in an instant.* "And if you had been there, and Zhao had overpowered them? What would you have done?"

"I'm not a traitor!"

"No, you are not," Iroh nodded. "I do not believe you ever could be. No matter what you chose."

Zuko was shaking his head, as if to drive away pain. "It doesn't matter now. She's gone."

Something in Iroh's heart eased, recognizing the truth. "You would have helped the Moon."

"I *wouldn't* have helped the Avatar!"

"I said nothing of the airbender, nephew," Iroh said deliberately. "Two who fight for the same cause are not always allies." He shrugged, as if it were of no importance. "I will admit, I am curious why you would choose so. It would have been a noble effort, but you are not usually the first to approve of dealing with spirits."

"They don't exactly approve of me, or none of this would have happened," Zuko said venomously. Closed his eyes, and gripped the bridge of his nose, fighting back frustration. "Uncle. In case you didn't notice, we've been living on a *ship* the past three years. If we didn't pay attention to the moon, we'd be dead." An explosive sigh, with only a hint of steam. "We need supplies, and we need to get moving."

Nodding, Iroh followed his nephew toward the market. Still a bit sore of foot, but much lighter of heart.

His spirit is wounded, but it still fights. He needs only time. And a little... encouragement.

"Well, if it isn't a little deserter," a smug voice drawled. "Front lines too hot for you?"

Spirits, Iroh thought darkly, eyeing the massive Earth Kingdom swordsman smirking their way, *you are* not helping.

Patience. Patience, and shadows.

"Who do you think you're fooling, old man? That boy's no healer."

Wait. For the right time to strike.

"Did his family pay you to take him, or did you just pick up a stray?"

Breathe. Crouch. *There.*

"Who's there?"

Swordsman, yes. Good one, no. Grab, pull, use the solid wall against the almost as solid skull-

The man was out. And the swords were....

Spin, and cut the air. Feel their movement; not as separate blades, but two halves of a whole.

Not bad. Not the best, but not bad.

How a bragging lowlife like this had ended up with master-quality swords, he'd never know. Bastard hadn't been taking care of them properly, that was certain.

Dao sheathed, he melted into the night. No real town watch here, but there was always the chance of wandering drunks, especially with such a full moon.

He made it back to their shelter in a stable's hayloft; the innkeeper hadn't been at all averse to arranging that instead of a paid room, once Uncle worked her over with hot stones and flattery. Which he really didn't want to think about. *Ever.*

The mask, Zuko tucked under the pile of supplies Uncle would have him pack in the morning. He should do the same for the dao....

No. I won them. They deserve better.

He hadn't weighted himself down with swords to raid the North Pole, not when he'd all but planned on going swimming. But he'd always carried the cleaning kit, ever since he first started learning blades. Through the invasion, the raft, their mad flight from Azula - always.

Unsheathing twin blades, Zuko peered along the edge of one for nicks and scratches, and set to work.

"I wondered if you would find him."

Sharpening stone in hand, Zuko hesitated, then kept working. "You *don't* want me to give them back."

"No, I do not," Uncle Iroh said thoughtfully, seated cross-legged in his bedding. "Our chances will be better if you are armed. Though it is just as well we are leaving early." He stroked his beard. "And since our men have never spoken of your extra training, even when Zhao asked - and believe me, he *did* ask, when he conscripted our men for the fleet - no one should connect this theft with us."

Zuko tried not to wince. "Theft? We're at war!"

"The Fire Nation may be. *We* are not." Iroh regarded him sternly. "You have always kept your honor, Prince Zuko. Do not lose it to despair. A leader of men does *not* allow his soldiers to pillage. That way lies hatred for the Fire Nation, and not a future of harmonious rule, but a bloody conquest that will never be satisfied." The stern look softened. "And a wise leader first commands himself."

Steel seemed to burn in his hands. Zuko swallowed, and laid it down. "...He called you a liar."

"There will always be those who believe the worst of men," Iroh said easily. "You are not a deserter, Prince Zuko. That, we both know."

Do we? "I'm not fooling anyone as a healer!" Hold the temper. *Hold* it. Hay and fire were a bad mix. "Uncle, this is crazy, I'll never - real healing takes years to learn, it's going to be obvious I - I can't do it!"

A sigh. But it didn't sound resigned, or disappointed. More... decided. "Nephew," Iroh said quietly. "Come here."

Biting his lip, Zuko did.

"Sit," Iroh instructed, lighting a small flame in the palm of his hand. "Fire and healing are more closely entwined than most will ever know. Fire is not only destruction; it is passion, will, and life itself. And that life can affect other lives." He held the flame in front of Zuko. "Your mother may have shown you this."

My mother?

"The motions are like what you use to raise warmth in your hands. Only instead of the heat of your body, you use the flame. Gently... do not pull, but coax it to you... blend the energy of the flame with your own...."

It was like ice giving way underfoot. One moment it was flame. The next-

Lighter. Different.

The circular motions fell into place, reminding him of the Avatar's sweep of calm air to storm, the waterbender's shove that froze waves into ice. The fire was more than flame, but it had to be coaxed there, held, persuaded....

"Good," Uncle said softly. "Now, let us see what you can do for an old man's sore feet."

Blinking - since when did his fire have bits of *green*? - it took a moment for his uncle's meaning to sink in. *He can't be serious.*

"Try," Iroh urged. "Only try. If it does not work - then yes, you may call your old uncle a fool, and we will find another way."

"Don't say things like that!" Zuko snapped, heartsick. *I said that. Because I wanted to believe it. Because otherwise Azula was lying, again, and I wanted to go home so much....* "You're not a fool, and you're not a liar, and he had *no right!*"

No one should say that to Uncle again. Ever.

Green. Bright as moonlight. Not hot, but warm as summer noon.

I can't hold this long....

Near, but not touching skin. Palms both turned outward now; he moved them over road-strained ankles, feeling strength leached out of him as it fed frayed energies. In his mind's eye, hints of copper warmed to antique gold.

"Enough," Uncle said firmly, wriggling his toes. "Reach back, and allow me to redirect what I can."

A wash of warmth, and sparks of pain burned away like dead leaves. Zuko lost the motion, flames falling apart into smoke. "...I couldn't hold it." He was *not* going to cry. Even if he was - tired. So tired of failing.

"That you could summon it at all, is more than I have ever been able to do."

Zuko stared at him.

Iroh gave him a wry smile. "Your mother showed me the kata many times, yet I could never master it. She said it had been passed down in her family. A technique based on legends. A secret, and a gift, from Kuzon of Byakko."

"Kuzon?" Zuko blanched.

"Your mother's grandfather. A powerful firebender, with quite the sense of humor, from his letters." Iroh raised curious brows. "You have heard the name?"

Zuko swallowed. "The Avatar... I overheard him say it." *Kind of.* "Someone he knew, a hundred years ago."

"Kuzon would have been fifteen," Iroh said thoughtfully. "It is possible. And perhaps that is why I could never master it. I have studied the waterbenders, but never have I held my own against an airbender."

Held my own. For all of two minutes. "Why would you study waterbenders?"

"Wisdom can be found in many places, Prince Zuko. Have you not studied the waterbender who bested you?"

Zuko tried not to snarl. "...Yes." And she'd better have some new tricks, next time. He was not going to be crushed under a column of ice again.

"Study her not only to defeat her, but to learn what may be useful for your own form," Iroh advised, running a careful hand over his nephew's back. "Does that hurt?"

Zuko frowned. "No." Which didn't make sense.

His uncle smiled. "Then it would seem, Prince Zuko, that we are *not* lying."

Realization sank in, and Zuko buried his head in his hands to muffle a disbelieving groan. *Oh, Agni. I'm going to have to go through with this....*

"Rest now." Iroh ruffled his short hair. "We will finish with your blades in the morning."

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Story belongs only to Vathara, Avatar belongs neither me nor her. Enjoy, and just a tipp: Vathara always wrote a little note in the end and I will include it of course, and you should definitely read it. It is really worth it.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The days began to fall into a pattern. Walk. Find someone - anyone - moderately friendly. Offer assistance, and keep asking, until they reached someone who needed them; to heal, or just help carry firewood, or who knew what. Bargain for something in return; sometimes coin, sometimes food, and sometimes... odder things.

"Fish hooks?" Uncle Iroh murmured under his breath, as a grateful farmer beamed at his cow-pig.

"Ask him to throw in some cord, and it's worth it," Zuko murmured back. Spear-fishing like a Water Tribe brat might not be up his alley, but with a hook and line, he could get somewhere. Doing something useful, keeping out of trouble... people left you *alone* on the ship if you were fishing. "That's Fire Nation steel. The hooks should last a while." Not like Earth Kingdom iron. Lousy stuff. Swordsmiths forged their own steel; either with some of the better local ores, or sometimes from ingots imported from the Fire Nation. Outside of that, local iron... well, there was a *reason* he could shatter it with a good heel-strike.

Uncle eyed him, curious, but set to bargaining the man out of a roll of cord as well. And was delighted to accept a small round of cheese, pressed on them by a relieved farmwife who'd been looking at short milk rations with her oldest daughter's first baby on the way.

It ought to keep while we travel, Zuko thought, making his farewell bows with Uncle and heading down the road. *And some fish will go after anything-*

"I'm surprised you agreed, nephew."

Zuko rolled his eyes. "Uncle, do you even know how much fish hooks cost?"

"Er...."

"I've been paying attention to what you charge. We weren't cheated."

"Really?"

"Really." Zuko hated shopping, at least as much as his uncle seemed to love it. Hated being where people could see, and stare, and whisper. But he hated being cheated more. Which meant if he wanted to get it *over* with, he had to know exactly what he needed, and how much it was worth.

The walk was quiet for a while. Zuko focused on breathing, trying not to think of what they would do next. In and out. In. And out-

"I did not expect you would be so willing to work with simple animals."

...Of course it couldn't last. "It's easier to hide what we're doing," Zuko said shortly. Which was worth cleaning off his boots. Mostly.

They'd found out the hard way that if he wanted to do anything more than just ease pain, he needed a fire to draw from. Using hot rocks, or even just his own fire, would work - but it left him dizzy and staggering, on his feet only through sheer will to keep moving until Uncle found a spot for him to collapse for the night.

No. If they wanted to keep this up - if they wanted to keep moving, keep alert - he had to have fire. And as long as their little pot of fire stayed out of sight of curious eyes... animals didn't ask questions.

"True," Uncle allowed. "But you were also kind to the creature. Even when she tried to bite."

"She didn't like me. She didn't lie about it." Zuko shrugged, unwilling to look at that thought too closely. "People are crazy."

"Some are, yes." Iroh frowned. "I wonder if that is the case where we are going."

Oh no. Oh, no. "We're not just going farther down the road."

"Well, we are."

Zuko winced, waiting for the other boulder to drop.

"It seems our last client believes the source of his cow-pig's illness is on our way. The Lu Yu ranch. They appear to have been having trouble, since the night the moon was eclipsed." Iroh frowned more deeply. "I wonder...."

Definitely a boulder. Of the cliff-sized variety. "Uncle. I don't want anything more to do with spirits."

"That does not mean they will have nothing to do with you, Prince Zuko."

Right. Like the universe would ever be kind enough to just leave him *alone*. "I don't have to go *looking* for them."

"That may be," Iroh allowed. "Yet in this case, it may be better to find them before they find us. If Zhao unleashed more than he knew, those moments the world was out of balance... spirits do not always distinguish between mortals well. Simply being of the Fire Nation may be enough to rouse their wrath."

"Which is an even *better* reason to go the *other way*."

"Well, it could be nothing but a sickness," Iroh said easily. "Indulge an old man's curiosity. Who knows," he chuckled, patting his stomach, "we may get dinner out of it!"

Zuko sighed, trying to ignore his own rumbling hunger. They'd been getting by, but not exactly well. "This is a bad idea."

Not that it really mattered. He knew how the world worked. Turn his back on whatever this was, it'd be sneaking up on him in the middle of the night. Better to face it head on. And hope he could improvise better than he had at the North Pole.

"And nothing has changed in their food or water?" Iroh tried not to scowl. He'd dealt with enough mounts in his time as a general to have a fair understanding of their afflictions. These black sores encrusting hooves of the ranch's few cow-pigs, and claws and legs of their ostrich-horses, seemed... unnatural. "Have you brought in any new stock in the past months? Perhaps from river bottoms, in a moister territory?"

"First thing I thought of," rancher Sho Lu Yu grumbled. "No. There's been nothing. Unless it was just hanging around for three months waiting, after those Fire Nation bastards-" Grim lips pressed together, cutting off his words.

"There was a raid?" Iroh inquired, careful not to keep too close an eye on his nephew as the young man moved along the corral, letting the herd take his scent. Ironic, that the blow Ozai had meant to shame his son forever shielded him here. So long as no one looked too closely. "If they knew their beasts were ill, it would explain why they sought yours."

"Nothing explains that filth-!"

Iroh did not react, watching out of the corner of his eyes as Zuko stiffened - then walked on, heading into the stables to check on sicker beasts.

"But it makes a lot more sense than a *kamuiy*," the rancher allowed, healed welts visible across corded muscles as he crossed his arms. "I swear, as if our family would ever allow ourselves to be dishonored enough to lead to that.... Well? What do you think?"

A malevolent kamuiy? A plague-spirit *would* explain this. All too well. And the healed marks of fingernails on the burly rancher's arms.... *Zuko was right. This was a bad idea.* "I can promise nothing," Iroh said reluctantly. "We may be able to help those who are less ill. And after that, if it is possible, I would like to walk the land they have been pastured on. Perhaps we may find something-"

"Uncle."

Not strident. Not demanding. He hurried into the stables anyway, somehow all the more worried. And winced, seeing the poor wreck of a creature his nephew was dribbling water into, one beak-full at a time. Black feathers, tattered and molted in the straw, ravaged legs and body.... "Nephew."

"She's still alive."

"Don't waste your time!" Sho's fist struck one of the stable's supporting beams, raising dust. The rancher drew in a snarling breath, limping slightly. "That's Asahi. She was - she's Ping's favorite. My daughter. If she could stand, she'd be trying to rip your throat out, boy. She's been crazy ever since the girl went missing. Ever since the moon went crazy."

"Our hopes for your daughter's safe return," Iroh said courteously. Really, what else could one say, in the face of that glare? "Is she the most ill?"

"Worst that's still alive. Tough bloodline; I'll say that much for Yonaguni stock. Too small for hard work and a lousy temper, just like the damn firebenders... but they don't give up." A muscle in his jaw jumped, and dark eyes smoldered.

Iroh regarded his handful of facts, and liked none of them. "So if she was one of the first to fall ill, where has she been?"

Spirits. That glare didn't look promising at all....

"Just over here." Huan pointed down the slope before them, where lush greenery and a liquid chuckle betrayed a hidden spring. One of Sho's older sons, he was almost as tall and burly, with a sour look on his face as he stamped his feet on the ground, obviously disgusted at actually having to *walk* somewhere. "Hope this isn't the source. Some of the best water on the place, here."

"Is that why Asahi was here?" Zuko asked, all too aware of time slipping away like grains of sand. If they could just get back soon, then maybe... he stomped on hope, trying not to think about it. "Looking for water?"

"...Yeah. Yeah, that's right."

Liar. He wasn't even any good at it. Zuko glanced at his uncle.

"Do not let us keep you from your work," Iroh said generously. "We can surely find our own way back."

"You do that," Huan said shortly. "There should be something left for you."

"We are much obliged," Iroh smiled. Which lasted only until the rancher was out of sight, and out of earshot. "Something is wrong here. Very wrong."

Zuko frowned, unwilling to go any closer to what should be inviting water. "It... does feel wrong." *Like the spirits' oasis, a little. But swampy.*

"The energy of the world has been disrupted here." Iroh shook his head. "Yet nothing seems tainted by human carelessness." He waved a hand. "Let us spread out and search. If the spirits are disturbed, something should be visible."

Search, Zuko fumed, after long minutes of fruitless efforts. *I don't even know what I'm looking for-*

Rocks turned under his feet.

Tired, hungry, and frustrated enough to spit sparks, he still had his balance. A skip back, and he avoided the unstable stones, if not the waft of decay that rolled out in their wake. Decay, and-

Iroh was there, holding him back. "Come away, nephew. Come away."

Zuko swallowed, unable to not look. "It's Ping, isn't it."

"I am afraid that it may be." Iroh's face was grave. "We cannot be found here, nephew."

No. That would be... not good. Especially since- "She hasn't been dead long enough for it to be the raid, has she?"

"A month and a half, perhaps. Let us go." Iroh sighed. "Well. Now I know why there is an evil kamuiy."

"A what?"

"A plague-spirit." Iroh led them away from the lonely cairn. "They are drawn by many things, but the most certain way to attract them is the murder of one with child."

"But why would anyone-?"

"I fear I know, nephew. I fear I know."

I will have to thank Madam Lin again later, for the coal, Iroh thought, taking a moment away from his careful arrangement of salt-dipped cut thorn branches to watch his nephew work. The first few times Zuko had tried to heal had been... well, not *quite* disasters. His nephew had discipline, when he was calm; even if it was shaken by disbelief that fire could ever heal, and stark terror that *he* could mend instead of destroy.

He'd improved since, yes. But Iroh had still had doubts anything could be done for Asahi. Such deep-rooted illness....

I underestimated my nephew's stubbornness. Iroh chuckled at himself. *I should know better.*

"They will notice, if you succeed," he'd warned his nephew earlier, voice light with a grim amusement he hadn't felt in a very long time. *Once a general, always a general, it seems.*

"Let them," Zuko had snarled. "She *bit* him, Uncle. She was *there*."

Iroh had nodded then, acknowledging that likely truth. And set to work in this fallow pasture, away from the main ranch, setting his kamuji trap. And watching.

Discipline, anger, and compassion. Iroh smiled to himself, watching his nephew call out veil after veil of fire, green flecked with warm gold. *A leader needs them all.*

Asahi lay quiet and mostly calm, black feathers only ruffling now and again to show her dislike of open flames. Weak as she had been, Iroh had still had to hold her down for the first pass; yet now she lay relaxed and still, peering curiously at the boy who was taking the pain away.

Thank you, little one, Iroh thought gratefully. *You help him more than you know.*

Last thorns and stones in place, the old general straightened, looking over the outline of the spirit-maze for any gaps not part of the pattern. *It may not even come.*

Perhaps. But then again, his nephew was currently stealing one of its most stubborn victims right out from under its repulsive nose. It should at least be *interested*.

Which will not make my nephew pleased.

On the other hand, something the young man could *fight* might do him a world of good. And kamuji could be fought. They could be beaten.

Whether there was a spirit or not, his nephew seemed to be expecting trouble. Zuko had already packed their gear for a midnight evacuation. Which was likely wise, no matter what the night might bring. Iroh didn't think the Lu Yu family knew they had noticed, but as they'd made their way back to the ranch, Zuko had spied Huan riding off to town. At twilight.

It could be innocent. An important errand. A girlfriend. A request for a squad of soldiers.

...Hmm. Perhaps Zuko's dire outlook on the world was contagious.

Or perhaps, Iroh thought, seeing a shadow move toward them from the stables, it was simply his belated recognition that he couldn't depend on Zuko's younger ears in the midst of healing.

"Nephew. Someone is coming."

"Almost done." Another wash of fire, and Zuko let the flames fade, reaching out so Asahi could sniff still-warm hands. He glanced toward the approaching woman, but kept his focus on the uncertain steed as she gained her feet. "How's that, girl? Shh. It's just me and Uncle, nothing to worry about."

"Madam Lin," Iroh nodded, as the rancher's wife came toward them with a lidded basket and wide eyes. "Is that perhaps breakfast, that we need not trouble you when we take our leave?"

She looked at his careful piles of thorns and stone, and Iroh knew she understood. "No," she said in a worn, worried voice. Opened the lid, and drew out dark clothing.

"Fire-thorns," Iroh observed, catching the glint of wild silk embroidered in protective patterns; glossy wood brown along edges of a fine green scarf, ruby-rust on hems and sleeve-seams of a pine-dark robe. "You must have been working on these for quite some time."

"They were for Ping," Lin admitted. "We'd been having so much ill luck, since the raid, I just wanted to...." She swallowed, and looked away. "I finished them a few days after she disappeared. If you're going to face the kamuiy... please. They might help."

"They may, indeed," Iroh said graciously, draping the scarf about his neck before he took Asahi's reins. Just as well for them that Earth Kingdom women tended to take after their men; taller and more solid than most in the Fire Nation.

Hands on the robe, Zuko hesitated, obviously uneasy. "If you made this for your daughter...."

"Ping is beyond its aid, now," Iroh said with quiet compassion. "You are not."

Lin's gaze whipped to him, wide and wild and-

Broken, with a terrible wonder, as she finally recognized the fine black steed alive and well beside him. "Oh, *Asahi*...." She pressed a fist to her lips, eyes closed, voice thick with tears. "Are you spirits, come to take your vengeance?"

Agni, let Zuko keep his head for once, Iroh prayed. "If we are, you know what you have done." He shook his head. "You knew she was not missing."

"You don't understand!" The break in her voice was awful to hear. "The town knew. They *knew*! It wasn't enough that we had to rebuild what burned, but my *daughter*...."

"Yes! She was your daughter!" Zuko said angrily. Clenched his fists, and shifted swords and sheath from hip to back, where the robe wouldn't interfere with his draw. "Who cares what the town knew? You should have protected her!"

"I tried!" A desperate wail. "We thought it would pass, and then... the rumors, and the *whispers*, and no one would give us fair prices anymore, and Huan's marriage contract was going to fall through, and... we were going to send her away! Where she'd be safe. Where no one would know! It was all arranged, she would have left in just a few days...."

"When the moon became as blood, and your husband decided he had no more use for pity," Iroh said sternly.

"I didn't know!" She fell to her knees, dripping tears. "I swear, I didn't know!"

"You didn't *not* know," Zuko started, disgusted-

Paused, glancing warily into the night.

It is near. "Build up the fire," Iroh ordered, grabbing a stem of thorns. "Do *not* let it touch you-"

Tear-soaked ground erupted, and he threw.

"Ahh! Salt! Salt!"

A high, chittering voice, like the mole-rat it resembled. If mole-rats ever grew to the size of a man. Its fur was sleek and glossy gray, as if in perfect health - yet eaten away with the same sores that afflicted the ranch.

"Stay back, and protect Madam Lin!" Iroh warned Zuko. "I will deal with this creature."

"Ohhh, *will* you, old fire?" Eyes like Azula's flames sneered at them all, one by one. "Old smoke, all your hope burned to ashes. Rotted willow, breaking in grief's storm; oh, so tasty. And-" A hissing laugh. "Little dragon, just barely hatched! And no wings to protect you."

"I can protect myself!" Zuko flared.

But he held back, even without Iroh's raised hand to stop him. Lin was whimpering, too pale to scream, and Zuko would never be so heartless as to leave her unprotected.

An Earth Kingdom woman. A *peasant*, and at least reluctant accomplice to murder. And the prince of the Fire Nation offered her mercy.

I have won, brother, Iroh knew, quiet pride warming him. *The battle will be long and dark, and he may doubt himself - but he will never be yours again.*

"Leave," he warned the spirit in his next breath. "You have no more place here. Ping's murder is known, to those who will see justice done. Lin Lu Yu will denounce her husband to the law, and that poor girl will have the proper rites. Begone!"

"Lin Lu Yu?" Another hiss of a laugh. "Old smoke. Old fool! Why would she, when it's her word against theirs?"

"No!" Lin gasped. "My sons would never-"

"Oh, they *will*, broken willow. Your little plan meant they'd have to live with their shame. A dead sister is nothing; hidden away, forgotten. A living child of fire to call them uncle- Augh! Salt! You dare!"

Iroh dipped thorny branches back into his pot of salted water, ready to sprinkle the beast again.

"We know the truth," he said grimly, "and there will be a reckoning. You have served your purpose. Your time in this world is past!"

"Silly smoke!" Teeth gleamed at him. "You're no earthbender! Your maze only touches the surface!"

A blast of dust, and the beast had burrowed out of sight.

That, I did not expect, Iroh thought worriedly. *Where could it have-*

The kamui erupted under Zuko's feet, but the young prince was already moving; a leaping spin of steel that took him away from unstable ground and cost the swift little monster half its whiskers and one ulcerated toe.

The scream knifed through the night, a caterwaul of rage and revenge.

If the Lu Yus did not know something was amiss before, they know it now.

Iroh blinked, catching a glint of fire. Zuko knew they had to stay hidden, he'd agreed not to bend unless the need was dire-

He didn't.

Spirit-fire, invisible to ordinary sight. It glimmered around his nephew from sheer force of will, glinting off blades, blazing high on protective fire-thorns. The sickly-gray power of the kamuiy tried to cling to steel, to climb and rot tempting flesh-

And was burned away. Vanquished.

Hissing, the beast turned on Iroh. Charged him, teeth and claws and flailing naked tail-

Vanished into the earth, just ahead of salt water.

"Where'd it go?" Zuko demanded, scanning the ground for movement.

"It wishes to cause pain," Iroh said grimly, backing up to his nephew and the trembling woman.

"But it is at heart a coward, and we can defend ourselves- nephew, no!"

Too late. Zuko had already swung onto Asahi's bare back, and was racing for the ranch, just behind mocking laughter.

Don't know why I'm doing this. Thought my family was messed up, but these guys! They deserve whatever the kamuiy's going to do.

Only it wouldn't stop there. Zuko *knew* it. Already, the animal-plague was starting to spread off this ranch to innocents. If it got into people....

Not going to happen.

Asahi moved like a dark wind. Ping must have *loved* her.

You tried to get away, didn't you, Ping? You fought him. Your own father.

I wish I was that brave....

The ranchers were out and angry, lanterns and spears in hand. "You!" Sho growled. "What are you doing on one of my mounts? Thief!"

"The kamuiy, *you moron!*" Zuko snapped, racing to track that telltale ripple of dirt. *There!*

In front of them. Too far for swords. The ground erupted-

Sorry, Uncle.

Zuko slashed air, fire blazing out to smash the spirit away from its target. Asahi squawked in protest, hopping sideways-

Which was just as well, as Sho's spear sliced through where they'd just been. "Firebender!"

"Plague-spirit, you rock-headed idiot!" Zuko twisted off Asahi, blades sweeping out to intercept screaming teeth. "Do you really want to fight me instead of *this*?"

From the number of spears jabbing his way, they really did.

Time to stop being subtle.

Earth was solid, rooted, stubborn. That's how they came at him, spear-points bristling like thorns, eyes wide and glazed as if they could ignore the malevolent spirit by sheer will.

Solid. Stubborn. Predictable. He could see exactly how to slice, leaving them all defenseless-

A sway of a waterbender's body, trapping his spearmen in ice....

Zuko echoed that flow of memory, twisting away from jabs with inches to spare. Spears struck unnatural fur-

Bounced off, as if the spirit were made of steel.

What the-?

"Die, little dragon!"

The kamuiy leapt for him, a whirlwind of teeth and claws and hate-

But he'd fought the wind before. He'd fought the *Avatar*. This creature wasn't even close.

Don't let it touch you.

One blade slashed fire at it to knock it back. Its twin cut behind him, spearheads falling like iron hail. He somersaulted over the porch rail and brought a heel down blazing fire onto dry wooden planks, searing through to intercept the spirit as it burrowed.

Amazing, how such an awful screech was music to his ears.

A more human howl, followed by blistering curses. "-Damn bitch hen!"

Aww. Asahi had bitten the bastard again. Shame she'd missed his throat.

Earth writhed under the hole ringed by blazing timbers. The kamuiy, trying to burrow away-

No. You. Don't!

Zuko yanked his arms up, feeding rage and pain and betrayal into flames already blazing. Fire roared, consuming wood like flash paper, whirling as he swept his arms across into a firestorm drilling down-

Burning into the soil itself. Consuming it, in white-hot rage.

This maze isn't just on the surface, spirit!

The kamuiy's screech rose higher and higher, itching at his ears like the calls of cricket-mice-

Cut off, with a sudden sense of absence. Filmy gray vapors rose from the flames, and shredded away.

"It is over, nephew."

Zuko staggered, painfully glad of the firm hand gripping his shoulder. Everything ached, and the world had an unsettling tendency to gray out at odd moments. "Uncle? Are you all-"

Groaning ranchers were scattered on the ground behind them, like so many fallen leaves. At least one beheaded spear had been further shattered by an annoyed blade-hand strike. And Asahi was standing over Sho, hissing.

Hungry and exhausted, Zuko grinned.

Uncle coughed into his fist, eyes ruefully amused. "I think, perhaps, it is best we go."

"My house!"

"Swiftly," Iroh added dryly.

Zuko stepped back, finally taking in the blazing building. The ranch-house was already crumbling into itself; flames vining out along attached fences, the very ground smoldering as fire crept through it. Wincing, Zuko lifted a hand-

"Let it burn."

Zuko swallowed, sheathing his dao. "Uncle?"

"Fire cleanses. If the town will not exact justice - I believe this should suffice."

Zuko grimaced, glancing down the road. Lanterns, torches, the glint of iron and steel.... "They may not agree with you."

"Oh dear," Uncle Iroh murmured.

They're armed, Zuko thought. They're fresh - fresher than we are, anyway. And we don't want to hurt anyone.

Decided, he whistled.

Asahi perked up her head, and stalked over to them.

Catching her reins, Zuko glanced at his uncle.

Iroh eyed the ostrich-horse. Glanced at the semiconscious ranchers, and the aghast Madam Lin. Looked at the roaring flames, and sighed.

Leaving his uncle to raid the stable for tack, Zuko ran for their supplies.

Asahi saddled, Iroh wasn't far behind. "Where are we going, nephew?"

"Anywhere but here."

I should have been a little more specific.

He should have known better. Really. They had hooks, line, bait - of *course* they'd end up in a dry waste where water was scarce and fish even scarcer. Not to mention a town full of scared civilians and a bunch of thugs masquerading as a home guard.

At least Sela's stew had been filling. Though he really wasn't sure about the job he'd done on their barn roof. Didn't match the other shingles at all.

But even Uncle had admitted it might be better to drop the traveling healer act for a few towns. Just in case the Lu Yus had spread the word. No matter how hungry it left them.

The robe was still wrapped up tightly in one of their saddlebags. Uncle insisted he hang onto it. For luck.

I hate luck.

"Why, Uncle?" Zuko asked now, as they rested in the grass to work out their next move. Not that there were that many directions to go from here that didn't end up in a desert. "We all hit it. But they couldn't cut it. It doesn't make sense."

Lying back, Iroh laughed softly. "I thought you did not wish to know more of the spirits, Prince Zuko."

"I don't," Zuko insisted. "And why are you calling me that? We're in the middle of *nowhere*."

"Because it is important." Iroh tapped his fingers together, choosing his words. "Many believe strong benders run in families. To a certain extent, this is true. Bending is a gift of the spirits, and those with strong spirits often raise strong children."

Zuko frowned, and sat up. "If that's true - why wipe out the Air Nomads? What was the *point*?"

"The point was to destroy the Avatar, and remove the knowledge of airbending from the world, so the cycle would remain broken," Iroh said gravely, rising to look him in the eye. "Unless a few sky bison have hidden themselves in the farthest mountains, they are gone. Any who might be born with the gift have no one to teach them." He chuckled. "Though I have heard interesting stories, of the Earth Kingdom refugees we saw at the Northern Air Temple-"

"I don't want to know."

Iroh raised an eyebrow. Zuko glared, and tried not to think. "We saw them gliding. Using the wind. That's all."

If I know anything else, if Father knows, I might have to - no. Not my problem. The Avatar is my problem. That's all.

He let his gaze slide aside, feeling oddly guilty. "So what does bending have to do with swords?"

"It was not your swords that cut him, young prince. It was the strength of your technique. And of your will." Iroh smiled at him. "I would not have risked dealing with a spirit bent on malice, if I did not know we both had the strength to survive the encounter."

Zuko swallowed. "I'm not strong." *Not like you.*

"We must teach you more history," Iroh mused. "Though finding the scrolls I seek outside the Fire Nation may be difficult... even before Fire Lord Sozin, the Avatar could not be everywhere at once. People had to deal with some spirits on their own. And those benders with the strongest will, who could defend their people from evil - they often became great leaders, and their children after them. That is your heritage, Prince Zuko. And mine. No banishment, no decree, no shame-" he reached out.

Zuko stiffened.

With a sigh, Iroh let his hand fall. "None of that can change who you are, my nephew. You are strong. Here." He tapped gently over his own heart. "Never forget that."

Never forget who you are. His mother's face, disappearing into the night after - after Azula had said those horrible lies. "But Azula's stronger."

"Azula is more skilled," Iroh said bluntly. "The two are not the same. Azula could not even attempt what you are beginning to master."

Zuko glanced at Asahi, happily cropping grass, shrubs, and the occasional cricket-mouse. Looked away. "Like that's really going to impress my father."

"The Fire Lord would not be pleased," Iroh admitted. "My brother is a suspicious man. I understand why your mother did not bring her skill to his attention. You may not have time for my proverbs, nephew, but I think Ozai learned one too well: all medicines can be poisons-"

The world crumbled.

Mother could heal.

Grandfather died.

"Everything I've done, I've done to protect you."

"Zuko. Zuko!" Uncle's hands were on his shoulders, shaking him. "Agni, you are pale as death... what is it?"

No. No, it can't be. "Azula always lies," Zuko whispered.

"It is best to assume so." Iroh studied his face, eyes grave. "Nephew. Tell me what is wrong?"

Zuko swallowed. "Grandfather was old, wasn't he?"

"Almost a hundred," Iroh acknowledged. "Though that is not always old, for a strong bender; King Bumi of Omashu is at least a decade older, and still an earthbender to be reckoned with. Sozin himself lived over a century and a half, vibrant to the end. And my father seemed well, before I left. But much can change in two years." He frowned. "Zuko. Tell me."

Zuko shook his head. *No. She wouldn't. But... she said... and I'm like her, I'm like her and I-* "Don't hate her. Please." *Don't hate me.*

Paling, Iroh let him go.

I'm going to be alone again. Like after Mom... I don't care if I deserve it, it hurts....

"Zuko." Iroh's voice was calm, the sea before a storm. "Why would you believe your mother could do such a thing?"

"...It's my fault."

"You were ten." Still that same ominous calm. "How could it ever be your fault?"

"He was going to kill me." Zuko swallowed hard, closing his eyes. If he didn't look, he wouldn't see. If he didn't look, he could pretend his uncle didn't hate him. Just for a little longer. "That's

what Azula said. But she always lies."

"Please." And there was a tremor in Iroh's voice that made him want to curl up and hide. "Start from the beginning."

Tell the truth. That's what Ping needed, wasn't it? Uncle's always looked after me. He should know.

He shouldn't have to stay with a monster.

Eyes shut, fists clenched, Zuko looked back into memory. "It started after we - heard about Lu Ten. Father went to meet the Fire Lord.... Azula wanted to hear what they said, so she pulled me behind a curtain to listen. Father... he said your line was ended, and he had heirs, he should be the next Fire Lord." Zuko swallowed. "I don't *know* what happened next. Grandfather was mad. I was scared. I ran away."

Iroh sighed. "But Azula did not."

"She - she came into my bedroom later. She said-"

"Dad's going to kill you. Really, he is."

"-She said Fire Lord Azulon was *angry*. That... that he told our father he should know the pain of losing a firstborn...."

"Oh, Agni," Iroh whispered.

"And - and then Mom came in, and took her away - and she woke me up in the middle of the night and I didn't even know to say goodbye, and - she was *gone*. And Grandfather was *dead*." He wasn't going to cry. He wasn't. "Mom said - she did it to protect me, it's my fault...."

"Zuko-"

A wagon's rumble; Zuko shot to his feet, reaching for his blades-

Sela. Face taut with an all too familiar fear. "You have to help!"

Who, us? You've got a whole town full of real Earth Kingdom neighbors to ask, lady. We're leaving.

"It's Li...."

Of course it was. And of course, they were the only other armed so-called citizens for miles, what was *wrong* with these people? Didn't they realize that if you sent men off to war, you made damn sure the women knew how to defend themselves? How to defend their *children*?

Like Mother fought for me.

Argh. How did he keep getting into these things?

You are a kind and gracious woman, Madam Sela, Iroh thought, calmly absconding with a length of chain from the blacksmith's forge while his nephew provided a distracting spectacle to the watching townsfolk. *But I do wish you had come along just a few minutes later.*

His nephew might have buried his pain under his determination to rescue the boy, but he still believed Iroh should hate him. And there had been no time to correct those awful fears.

Now, Zuko fought well, but he fought alone. And while Iroh had no fear for the young prince against any number of ordinary thugs, to face both numbers *and* an earthbender, without giving himself away... well, it might be difficult.

But he is not alone.

The earthbender's hammer lifted for a mighty blow-

Chain twirling over his head, Iroh threw, and yanked.

It never ceases to amaze me, how many benders fail to train with anything more than their arms.

Zuko's spinning kick caught the earthbender under the chin, and the man crumpled like a wilted flower.

Smiling in satisfaction, Iroh cut that troublemaking young scamp Li free-

"Boo! Cheater!"

Delivering one gap-toothed boy into Sela's anxious arms, Iroh turned toward the mob, incredulous. Surely, these people were not about to turn on his nephew simply because-

"What do you think you'd do against our guards in a *fair* fight, pretty-boy?"

Ah. The closest thing this town had to a village elder. Who'd been all too quick to bow to the Guard, while they were standing. For an instant, Iroh admired his nephew's self-control. Not a flicker of flame or breath of steam to be seen. Amazing, given he himself felt more than inclined to turn back the wheel of time a decade and start setting strategic points on fire.

Enough of that. "If you are depending on warriors who can only win a fair fight," Iroh declared, pitching his voice to carry, "then you are *all* doomed. The Fire Nation has no interest in fighting fair." No good general was. A fair fight meant a chance that you would lose. And then all your dead haunted you for nothing....

Reaching his nephew's side, Iroh smiled ruefully. "Some days," he said, voice low, "one can only make a strategic retreat."

Zuko stared at him, stunned. Disbelief, incredulity-

Hope, flickering in gold eyes like the embers of burning joss sticks.

Mounted double, they left the catcalls and anger behind.

"I do not hate Lady Ursa."

Reins in hand, Zuko stiffened. Forced himself to relax. "He was your father."

"True," Iroh allowed, heartsick. "But no father should ask what he asked of his son. And no son should ever grant such a horrible request." He sighed. "I hope my father meant only a line adoption; to give you to me as an heir in Lu Ten's place. But it would seem your father, at least, thought... otherwise."

That, or Ozai simply could not live with the insult of being passed over as heir for a boy he thought

weak and useless. And had decided to rid himself of the shame. Directly.

Suddenly, that horrible Agni Kai made far too much sense.

How long have you wished him dead, brother? How long?

But past was past, and Zuko already carried enough pain. "I think of what I would have done, had the Fire Lord asked me to harm Lu Ten," Iroh said soberly. "And though I feel pain, and grief... I do not blame your mother. Your death, or Fire Lord Azulon's, or her flight; those were her choices. And brave and cunning as she was, I do not think she would have survived fleeing the very heart of the Fire Nation with you at her side. Ozai would have hunted you down. Both of you." Iroh swallowed the anger, if he could not hide the grief. "I do not hate her, nephew. And I do not hate you."

Zuko glanced behind them, checking for any pursuit. So far, there was none; the villagers content to have merely run trouble out of town. "Azula...."

"Yes?"

"...Never mind."

"Such poisonous words are like knives in the dark, nephew," Iroh stated gravely. "Force them into the light, and they have lost the advantage."

Zuko swallowed, and drew Asahi to a halt. Dismounted, checking her feet quickly, and started walking, leading the black hen. "She'd... quote that proverb. A lot. And *look* at me."

All medicines are poisons. Yes. He could see it, Agni help him. "You believe she knew of Lady Ursa's skill."

"She's *Azula*." Zuko's hands fisted on the reins. "She'd... *do* things, leave them bleeding, and I couldn't...." He shook his head, violently. "At least - she got bored with that. After a while."

Oh, Zuko. His nephew was *not* a fool. Try to heal, and mark himself a traitor, as he knew Ursa would have been marked? Try, and fail, as a young firebender with no one to correct such a delicate technique *would* have failed....

It is not a wonder he feared to try. That he fought the fear, when I asked, and when Asahi needed him - Ozai, you are a fool. "Why did you not tell me?"

"Who was going to stop her?" Zuko said bitterly. "She's... she has a pattern. She starts on something, and - she keeps doing it, more and more, until you blow up. And then she does it even more. But if you can act like it doesn't matter, like you don't care... sometimes she gets bored." He swallowed. "I'm not good at keeping still. Acting like I don't care. I should be better."

You fooled most of your crews for three years, Iroh thought wryly. "Do you remember the storm? I believe your men prefer the prince who honestly risks their lives, rather than a ruler who executes those who hesitate at her whims."

That earned him a troubled glance back, before his nephew's jaw clenched, silent.

Iroh hid a smile. Certainly, a prince commanded by right. But if your men followed out of their own will, as well as duty - that was a tie not lightly broken. Not among their people, at least.

And I do not doubt that is part of what Fire Lord Sozin played on, to lead us to destroy the Air

Nomads. We of the Fire Nation are loyal, to the death - and when the airbenders would change their minds and shift, as history says was their way, those of us who might have counted them as friends would have felt... betrayed.

And unearned betrayal drove his people to desperate acts. If history had not sufficed to teach him that, three years on his nephew's quest had driven the point home to the heart.

"Do you think she suffered?" Zuko's face was set, and he would not look back. "I've heard - some people hang on for days before...."

Heard, indeed. How Azula had used that to prey on his nephew's mind, perhaps he was better off not knowing. "If she had died that way... there are limits to what my brother could conceal."

Zuko did look at him then, grim and hurting. "She betrayed the *Fire Lord*."

"If she did, she did so as your mother," Iroh said bluntly. "Her loyalty is to her children, her husband, and her family. So it has been since the first firebenders earned their skills under dragons' wings; so it will be, until the nations are no more. To kill her own beloved father - yes, that betrayal would have wounded her spirit to the grave. But Fire Lord Azulon... it is quite possible that she survived."

"Then *where is she*?"

"If I knew, my nephew, I would help you find her." *Because she is your mother, and so holds her own claim on you. Though I would not do so without help. For my sake, as well as hers. I do not think I would be gentle, asking about that night. And about why she left you behind.*

"Maybe you're wrong," Zuko said quietly. "Maybe she was loyal." He stared down the road, seeing nothing. "Have you seen someone die like that?"

"In war, anyone's loyalty may be strained past bearing," Iroh admitted. "I have seen traitors' deaths. And they are not pleasant." *If my aide had not nursed me, and kept silent... well.*

"So how can she post those lies? Calling you a traitor?" Zuko said fiercely. "You're the Fire Lord's brother. You'd be-" He cut himself off, with a breath of irritated steam. "But... Sho killed Ping. And she was his daughter. How could he... I've *seen* these people, and sometimes they act like decent people, like Sela, but others...."

"Other nations are not bound as we are," Iroh acknowledged. "And they do not risk their lives, when those bonds are broken."

"So if Azula posts a reward for traitors, they'll believe it." Zuko muttered something under his breath, almost too low to hear.

Iroh stifled a rueful laugh in a deliberate cough. Three years aboard ship might have been good for his nephew's spirit, but they had wreaked unholy havoc on a prince's vocabulary.

Perhaps he will listen, now. If I am subtle. "It is not impossible. We have been gone for some time. It is likely Fire Lord Ozai has considered that any illness of mine," *or yours*, "might have been hidden by our crew."

"They haven't!"

No, worse luck. "And while it is rare, some firebenders have survived."

"General Jeong Jeong," his nephew nodded grimly.

"I know of others." *Carefully.* "Sometimes, when you are trapped by two bonds, one must break. From need, from fear... from finding one's loyalty was gifted to one not worthy of it, and you must take it back." *Listen to me, nephew. Listen, and heed.*

"I *know* where my loyalties are."

"As do I, Prince Zuko." *Unfortunately.*

Patience, the elderly general reminded himself, as he had for years. *Fire wishes to burn through the enemy - but you must be like water, wearing away stone.*

Easy enough to tell himself years ago, when searching for the Avatar had been a fruitless quest. With the airbender returned, and Sozin's Comet on its way... things were beginning to become *difficult*.

At least we have not seen the bison since the North Pole-

Zuko stopped. Stiffened. Dropped to one knee to study the road.

Stood, with a tuft of familiar fur.

If there *had* been a spirit in front of them, Iroh would have set it on *fire*.

Chapter End Notes

A/N (by Vathara): This chapter owes at least as much to Princess Mononoke as it does to reading about Chinese and Japanese mythical beasts. Especially the idea that outraged spirits have a tendency to wreak havoc on anybody in reach, innocent or not. We see this with the Hei Bai forest spirit, and somewhat with Koizilla; you have to wonder what would have happened to the Water Tribe if they hadn't hit the ice in supplication, and if Zuko had been a little slower, he'd have been grabbed right along with Zhao.

(Which makes me wonder what Iroh would have done if that happened; he's been to the spirit world, canon. No matter what the outcome, I can't imagine him being very happy with Aang. Bunny for adoption, anyone?)

According to Wikipedia, the eight native Japanese horse breeds are the Hokkaido Pony, Kiso, Misaki, Miyako Pony, Noma pony, Tokara, Tsushima, and Yonaguni.

A kamuiy - the more modern spelling is kamui - is an Ainu spirit, fairly similar to the Japanese concept of kami. Some are good, some are evil, some downright mischievous, and all of them are dangerous. A thorn/flame embroidery pattern is historically used to prevent evil spirits from entering the body.

The whole "spiritual metamorphosis" bit never worked for me. And given Iroh's later-exposed desire to have the world back in balance, the way he barely nudged Zuko along the right path always seemed odd. Which got bundled up with several other plot holes in Avatar canon. First, a century of war, and Jeong Jeong's the first to desert? Very implausible given human nature. Second, how did large, dangerous, intelligent

creatures such as dragons go from "lots" in Aang's time to barely hanging on a hundred years later? Especially given they were known to be the inspiration for firebending? Glory only motivates people so far in the face of imminent death. Third... "Crossroads of Destiny". I grant that Zuko is screwed up, a bit thickheaded, and desperate to get back in Ozai's good graces - but just a few months earlier, Azula tried to kill him. Listening to her at all seems about as smart as walking up to a guillotine.

So, given that bending is connected to the spirit, that fire is the source of life, that the Fire Nation was inspired in part by early modern Japan, and that very few members of the Fire Nation ever desert, and survive... this is what the bunnies came up with. Clan loyalties, and loyalties to your commanders - and the consequences for breaking either come straight back on you.

Note, this doesn't mean Ozai suffered any consequences for what he did to Zuko. Your loyalty, and your spirit, belong to you; and it's very obvious Ozai never felt loyalty to his son at all. But since Zuko is loyal to his father - Iroh has to be very, very careful, indeed.

And in Welsh law, while sneaking a horse out from under your host's roof constitutes Very Bad, grabbing one under combat conditions to escape a lynch mob was looked at a lot more leniently.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: The whole thing about being Vatharas work and the rights of the tV-show and me owning nothing.

This is too easy, Zuko thought darkly.

They were alternating riding and walking through the grassland; not the fastest they could have gone, but he wanted Asahi in shape to run if things went wrong. And he had a lot more practice tracking that flying fur rug than Azula did. He could cut loops off the trail, see in advance obstacles the bison would have soared over and the tank had to crunch its way around, and work out their own route, easier than hers.

And it was definitely Azula. Who else could divert a valuable war machine out here, where there were no strategic objectives to be taken? Given that - he'd take every advantage he could get.

But it was too easy. And that had nothing to do with the trail, and everything to do with the older firebender currently humming that bawdy tune about girls in Ba Sing Se.

"You should be talking me out of this."

"Hmm?" Currently riding, Uncle Iroh gave him a look of bemused surprise.

"We're outnumbered."

"That is very likely," Iroh allowed.

"She's in better condition than we are." Azula hadn't spent more than two months injured and hungry, count on it. "She has access to supplies. Probably better maps, too, and we're heading into unknown territory."

"All true."

"She's flushed them out of at least two camps," Zuko went on. "She's got them on the run. They're *reacting*, not thinking. Meaning the Avatar's lost his best tactical asset." That idiot Water Tribe boy might be annoying as all hells - Zuko knew *exactly* where he was going to jam that boomerang, if he got the chance - but he was the closest thing the Avatar had to a strategic planner. If he was too tired and shaken to come up with a plan, the Avatar's little gang was screwed. "Sooner or later the bison's going to get tired - sooner, if they don't start *thinking* - and it'll be all over... why are you looking at me like that?"

Iroh was smiling at him, hands folded on the saddle's pommel. "A teacher is always pleased to know when his student has mastered the lesson."

Mastered the- never mind, even if he asked it wouldn't make sense. "Uncle, this is a bad idea."

"It is," Iroh nodded. "You have summed up the worst of it quite well. If this were only a matter of your honor, nephew - yes, I would object. But it is not."

Only my honor? Only my- Wait. "It's not?" Zuko asked warily.

"No." Iroh frowned. "Fire Lord Ozai wishes the Avatar alive, which is wise. Why hunt among the Water Tribes, who still resist, if we do not have to? You know Azula's power, and you believe she can capture the Avatar. That may be true. But you also know the Avatar's power. Can she *hold* him, nephew? Without killing him?"

A whirlpool rising out of southern polar seas, sweeping sailors from his ship. A massive, glowing *thing* at the North Pole, blasting through the Fire Navy's might. "...No."

"And will she be humble enough to admit that she cannot?"

Azula, humble? The two words didn't even belong in the same universe. Wordless, Zuko shook his head.

"And if she does slay him.... Avatar Roku's fate may be known to some among the Fire Sages, none can say for certain. And our nation conquers in the wake of that uncertainty. If it were to become known that the royal family *killed* an Avatar - there would be no chance for peace in our colonies while this generation lives." Iroh regarded him gravely. "We are loyal to the Fire Nation. We must not allow this to happen."

My people. The colonies were as close as he'd come to home for three years. Technically, he wasn't supposed to be there, either... but all nations came to trade in some of those ports, and on festival nights when everyone wore masks, even he could go unnoticed. It was worth being no one, to taste fire flakes and listen to people who sounded nothing like the Navy. "What should we do, Uncle?"

"You have laid out our disadvantages well," Iroh said thoughtfully. "Please, continue."

"This isn't a tactical exercise, Uncle!"

"Is it not?" Iroh regarded him with mild reproach. "Remember, nephew. The warrior whose anger rules him has already lost. We have time. They are not near. Calm yourself, and consider the situation for all its outcomes. Even, perhaps, victory."

Treat it like an exercise. His blood boiled, he wanted to *burn* something - but that would be stupid, here in the middle of flammable grass. Though they had used that to their advantage, earlier; the pair of them controlling a circle of flame to flush out enough vole-rabbits for their first hearty meal in days. Asahi hadn't minded roasted cricket-mice, either.

nd Azula thought it was stupid to read stories about primitive firebenders- stop. Stop right there. She's the obstacle, remember? Just... try not to think about her. Much.

"We've probably got surprise," Zuko said at last. "She doesn't know we're here, or we'd know it by now." By way of lethal blue fire; no, she couldn't know. "And the Avatar probably thinks we went down with the fleet." *If he thinks about us at all.* And he was not going to let that make him mad. He wasn't. If the Avatar underestimated him - well, good. He could use another edge.

Besides, it wasn't like it was personal. The Avatar was a *kid*. He underestimated everybody. After all, the so-called link between the two worlds hadn't seen Zhao's plan coming either....

Zuko frowned, trying to pin down that thought.

"Surprise may help," Iroh nodded. "What else? You have thought of something."

"I'm not sure it helps, Uncle...."

Iroh raised an eyebrow. "I am curious, nonetheless."

"They don't know what they're dealing with," Zuko said at last. "None of them do." Azula probably thought, of the two Water Tribe siblings, it was the *waterbender* who was dangerous. And sure, she was - but not nearly as dangerous as she and the Avatar were with her brother's plans backing them up. And as far as what the Avatar thought about Azula....

"If we knew each other back then, do you think we could have been friends too?"

"Spirits," Zuko hissed, "please tell me he's not that stupid."

Even as he said it, he had an awful suspicion the spirits were laughing at him.

When they found the decoy trail, it wasn't a suspicion anymore. "Uncle?"

"Yes, nephew?"

"If those monks weren't dead, I think I'd kill them all over again."

"Prince Zuko-"

"*Washed* bison fur? Forget the Avatar - don't those primitive, *hunting* Water Tribe peasants *know* any tracker could tell the difference? A *blind hog-monkey* could see through this!"

Dismounting, Iroh coughed into his fist, eyes suspiciously alight. "A pity that we will not be able to tell him so."

"Oh, we will," Zuko snarled.

"He has his airstaff," Iroh observed, patting Asahi while she nibbled on spruce buds, apparently out of curiosity. "When he finishes laying his trail, he can simply fly away, without a trace."

"Which is why he *won't*," Zuko said grimly. "He's an airbender, Uncle. He thinks flying can get him out of anything. He's *not* going to do the smart thing, and retreat. He's going to find a spot for an ambush, and he's going to wait. Only he's not going to ambush her. He's going to *talk*."

Iroh was silent a long moment, considering that. "Do not take this the wrong way, nephew... but I hope that you are wrong."

"...I know."

He wasn't.

"So, where is your nephew?"

Good question, Iroh thought, looking past the little blind earthbender. "Scouting ahead." Which had seemed best, one person alone on Asahi could retreat far faster.... "But he should have returned by now. I hope he has not run into something unexpected." Or worse, the one danger they did expect, that he had planned to face with his nephew.

Agni, let my nephew be sensible. Let him not try to take her alone.

Assuming, of course, Zuko had a choice.

"Scouting?" Toph chuckled. "You make him sound like a whole army patrol."

Oops. "Ah, well. I was a soldier, a long time ago." *And not long enough, sometimes.* "Traveling... it brings back old memories."

"Huh." Her bare feet felt at the ground, like a fisherman absently knotting a net. "Well, I don't think there are any bad guys around here. Maybe he's just lost."

"Yes, he is. A little bit." Iroh smiled sadly. "Our lives have recently changed, and while I think much good may come of it, it has been difficult. My nephew has choices to make. Some, I did not even know he might have, when we began our journey. He doesn't know it yet, but he is trying to figure out who he is, and what he wants." He sighed. "It is hard, to even look down a path your father would not approve of." Belatedly, he remembered his guest. "Er, that is, I meant to say-

"It's okay, I get you." Toph grinned, in a way he'd seen on some of the best firebenders in the service. Cocky, and with good reason. "He's an idiot, but he's *your* idiot. Want some help finding him?"

Hmm. Accept the aid of a young, if powerful, earthbender, and run the risk she'd turn them both over to the Earth Kingdom? Or refuse, and possibly find his nephew facing Azula?

Well. As he'd decided with the white jade, it wasn't much of a choice. "I would be honored to accept your assistance."

"You're really worried," Toph said, not smiling. "What's wrong?"

Finishing his tea, Iroh sighed. "I believe there may be a small Fire Nation force nearby."

"What, here? In the middle of the kingdom?"

Iroh frowned. She didn't seem surprised....

"Yeah, you do need help," Toph said decisively, dusting off green robes as she stood. "Let's go find some idiots."

"I would not say my nephew is an idiot," Iroh said judiciously. "Most of the time."

Toph snickered, picking up her bag as he packed away his teapot. "Your nephew's very lucky, even if he doesn't know it."

Iroh smiled ruefully. *I doubt he would agree with you....*

"Zuzu?" the Avatar laughed.

It was like white-hot barbs under his skin. *Don't let it get to you*, Zuko seethed. Almost cursing himself for leaving his dao on Asahi. But Uncle had been adamant. Leave the swords - leave the very fact that skill existed - as a tile up his sleeve. Azula would never take him and sharp edges seriously, anyway. Unless he was trying to kill her. And he couldn't. *Just - don't.*

It wasn't helping. On one side of him, the living symbol of everything he'd fought for three years; the only thing between him and his honor, his throne, his country.

Father's love....

On the other side, his nightmare. His little sister.

"You're a big brother," his mother had told him, over and over again, when he'd been especially bratty and jealous of an annoying little *baby* taking up *his* mother's attention. "It's your job to protect her. No one will ever do that like you will."

He'd believed it. He'd *wanted* to believe it. Agni help him, part of him *still* believed it.

I love you, Mom. But who was supposed to protect me from her?

He had to try.

"This isn't going to work, Azula!" *You don't have chains, you don't even have rope - you don't have a clue.* "The Fire Lord wants him alive."

"Like the little *failure* knows what Father wants." Her smile was mocking as ever. Chilling to the bone. "I'm not going anywhere."

Zuko swallowed dryly. "Yes, you are." *For Father. For my people. For me.*

I have to get this right.

The smile spread, glinting white teeth. "Who's going to make me? *Mom?*"

Traitor. Poisoner. You'll die like she did, and no one will even care you're gone....

Years of whispers, eating at him like acid. He knew what she was waiting for, and hated himself for it; the temper that would flare out of control, leaving him easy prey to her attack-

A memory of shaped warmth, bringing an absence of pain. Of a soft whistle, and feathers pressed gratefully against his hand. Of a firestorm, wreaking justice for an unmarked grave.

"Azula could not even attempt what you are beginning to master."

Zuko breathed, letting the whispers fade away. *Not this time, Azula.*

Her smile faded slightly, and he couldn't quell a shiver. He knew that look. Azula had seen something she didn't expect, and was calculating how to fit it into her plans-

Blue fire.

"The best block, is not to be there."

Too bad Uncle's advice about fighting never quite seemed to catch up with Azula. He had to block, fended off her fire with a breath-stealing impact on dusty ground.

Faster than I am, better than I am, she's going to win-

"We do not need to win this battle, Prince Zuko. We simply must not lose."

My people. Fingers clenched, Zuko coughed, and got back to his feet, dimly surprised Azula hadn't finished him off-

She was chasing the Avatar. Of course.

"The wise warrior knows his limitations, and accepts them. If she is more skilled than you - how can we use that against her?"

Good question, Uncle. Azula was punching blasts of blue fire at Aang, every one just barely a miss. She was faster, more skilled, more precise-

Precise. Control. Azula controlled everything and everyone around her, just like their father did. What they couldn't control, they destroyed.

Make her lose control. Make her angry.

Azula chased the Avatar into a wrecked building. Zuko let her hear him follow - then whipped around, fighting down the impulse to *chase* as he raced back to open air.

Sure, chase him into a building. Airbender, Azula. He loves bouncing people off walls; I should know. He can head out a window and be gone.

Just outside the doorway, Zuko swept his arms in a deliberate arc he hadn't used in weeks, hands curling and ready-

Blasted fire into the main support beams, and *felt* them catch.

A superior fighter made the terrain his ally. Ghost town. *Dry wood.*

This isn't going to kill you, Zuko knew; not sure who he was thinking of, as he urged flames upward. Like a graceful, angry flow of dark hair and blue dress, fighting him to the last in a spirit-touched oasis. Like nothing Azula would have *ever* fought.

This isn't going to kill you. But it's definitely going to get your attention.

And no matter how deeply Uncle might be contemplating his tea, he'd never miss this.

Well, Azula thought coolly, clinging to the second-story ledge as flames rose around them, *this is new.*

Either this was a particularly desperate gambit on her pathetic brother's part, or little Zuzu had grown a ruthless streak while he was exiled.

Please. With his tea-drinking kookiness?

For a once-great general, Uncle was amazingly easy to fool about how she *played* with her brother. Just smile at the right time, and look oh so *concerned* about how hard Zuzu tried, wasn't it a shame he'd had to start a year behind her and just never caught up....

Not that Zuko ever could catch up. He worried about people. Cared what they thought; as if what weaklings thought mattered to the royal family. He had no *focus*.

So. Had to be desperate, then. Not that it would work. She was the prodigy, after all. The best. Keeping a bit of over-enthusiastic fire from singeing her was easy.

Though it did split her concentration. Which was annoying, when the Avatar was *so close*-

Well. Look at that. Trembling, sweating, even the ball of air fizzling out from under him... the little airbender was *afraid* of fire.

Oh, poor Zuzu. You're such a good brother.

Such a good fool.

...Ow.

He was in the street. At least, Zuko thought he was in the street. He'd been fighting Azula for control of the fire, she'd made some kind of *twist* in the midst of the flames....

After that, everything was fuzzy.

I can't be dead. I hurt too much. He blinked, and faded brown resolved. "Uncle?"

"Get up!"

He grabbed Iroh's hand with trembling relief. Uncle was here. He'd promised, and he *was* here.

No. You can't collapse. Not yet. "Need at least two benders to make that work," Zuko observed, world still spinning.

About to speak, Iroh blinked instead, and raised an eyebrow at the structure crumbling into flames. "Azula was in there?"

Fire-blasts and wind-bursts echoed through the streets. "Was," Zuko said grimly.

They ran for the fight.

Zuko? Katara thought, dazed, water at ready.

Of *course* Zuko. Why *not* Zuko? Miss crazy blue firebender had chased them all the way from Omashu, why shouldn't their very own personal bogeyman show up again?

Sokka was right. We should have let him freeze....

Except crazy as it was - and Sokka was right about lack of sleep making you crazy, not that she'd ever admit it - Zuko didn't seem interested in Aang at all. He was totally focused on the girl in Fire Nation armor, backing her into a corner right along with the rest of them.

He's... helping us?

He was with the old firebender, the one who'd tried to save the Moon Spirit from Zhao. Fire Nation, her enemy - and he'd still *tried*.

But this is Zuko. It's got to be a trick. Somehow. I don't know how, yet, but-

Gold eyes didn't even flicker, before blue fire flew. Not toward Aang. Not toward them. Toward....

Fire Nation, but he was trying to help, and - he's an old man, how could she-?

He didn't cry out. But Zuko....

Katara hadn't heard anyone scream like that since-

Mom.

No one deserved to suffer like that.

Not even Zuko? the same surly, malicious voice that had picked a fight with Toph sniffed.

No. Not even an arrogant, high-handed, spoiled *prince* of an enemy... what in the world was he doing to that fire?

Flow with the flame.

Forget knots of copper instead of gold threads; part of what he was working with was charred, and too much just blackened ash. He had to dig in, pour in the fire and his own strength, somehow clear what couldn't be restored out-

"Katara! Don't put out the fire!"

The Avatar. Serious, for once. And damn right. He *needed* that fire. Uncle needed it, and while he'd never tried to seriously hurt the Avatar's little band of renegades, if they got between him and Uncle now....

Something cool slipped in under the flames, laving away ashes.

The waterbender. I should-

But the water didn't push. It just flowed around his fire, working at knots he hadn't touched. Or *had* touched, and couldn't - quite - unravel.

Why is she helping?

Didn't matter. Worry about it later. Just keep working, keep healing, and *damn* Azula....

"Don't push too hard. You want to work with the body, not against it."

He tried. Panic was the enemy. Uncle needed him to be thinking, not crying. Definitely not driving off a healer who seemed to know what she was doing, no matter how much he wanted to scream his fury to the skies.

How could she? How could she?

"It's okay, you're doing fine... whoa, that's a weird thing to say. Okay, just listen. Move around me, all right? I'm going to get the tricky parts. Just back me up, and everything's going to be fine."

Just because you're after the same goal, doesn't mean you're allies.

Some of the screaming in his head - *you're helping the Avatar!* - finally went quiet.

She's a healer. She's helping Uncle. Which is going to help me, and the Fire Nation. I don't have to like her. I just have to use it.

Better. Much better. As was the feel of Uncle's pulse under his hand when he ventured to touch healing skin; still fast, but steady.

Water retreated, and he let the fire go. *She uses a waterskin*, Zuko thought suddenly. *So even when*

there's no water near to grab.... I wonder... didn't one of Uncle's scrolls say something about firepots...?

Grimacing, Zuko tried to gather his scattered concentration. Fire or no fire, he'd really overdone it this time.

I need sleep. Soon.

But not yet. Not until- Gathering his courage, he looked at the awful wound. Cloth was charred, still tainted with the awful scent of roasted flesh, but....

Letting the little earthbender help him sit up by way of a raised rock, Uncle smiled at him. "Well done." And lifted an expressive brow.

I know, Uncle. I know. Rising to his feet - he was *not* going to wobble, damn it - he ignored the rising babble from the two boys. And bowed to the waterbender.

Katara. You owe her that. And more.

"I owe you," Zuko said roughly, rising. "And I pay my debts." He skewered the airbender with a look. "Azula's going to kill you."

The Water Tribe boy snorted. "You've got a real funny way of-"

"Let him talk, Snoozles!" The earthbender stamped a foot on the ground for emphasis, dropping the boy, boomerang and all, into a sudden sinkhole. "This is important."

"Toph!"

"He's just talking, Sokka." Katara's voice was hard, but level. "Let him."

Amazing. Someone in the little bunch actually had sense. "Azula's not an exile," Zuko went on. "Fire Navy ship, Yu Yan, fresh mounts, tanks - if she asks for it, she'll get it."

"Zhao had all that," the Avatar started, "and-"

"Zhao just killed people when he didn't get what he wanted," Zuko bit out. "Azula is *worse*."

"Oh yeah?" Sokka challenged, up to his chin in dirt. He should have looked ridiculous, except for the determination in blue eyes. "And how, exactly, do you get worse than death?"

"She finds what you love, and she takes it away." *No. I shouldn't have said that. I shouldn't have....*

But he had. And from the way the airbender flinched, something had finally, *finally* gotten through that shaved, tattooed head.

Use it.

"She'll track you," Zuko went on harshly, standing his ground. "I did it by asking questions and following what I could see; you think it's a hundred years ago and sky bison are everywhere? They're *not*. People *notice*. And maybe some of them wouldn't talk to me because you're the Avatar, but believe me, they *will* talk to Azula. Because she smiles, and she knows how to make people want to trust her - and if they don't talk, someone will disappear. Maybe their wife. Or their friends. Or their *children*. And if they're *lucky*, they'll get a body back. She broke her neck. He drowned. They got buried in a landslide. Oh, what *horrible accidents*." He had to stop, and breathe, smoke curling up from clenched fists. "She'll say it just like that. And smile. And ask again." He

stared into gray eyes, trying not to shake. "She's trying to kill you. She won't stop until she catches you. *Any* of you." Another breath. Spirits, he was going to kill something. Or throw up. Maybe both. "Do you understand me? Didn't any of those monks tell you what *real* people are like? We're not all *worth* saving, you idiot!"

Aang swallowed hard, but met him gaze for gaze. "I don't believe that, Zuko." He shook his head. "I can't."

Zuko saw pure, blinding red. "Then you're going to *die*-!"

"Nephew."

Enough. Just enough, to catch him before his temper teetered over the ragged edge. Zuko forced clenched fists open, dissipating daggers of flame.

"Go find Asahi," Iroh directed, golden gaze worried and sympathetic. "We will need to move swiftly."

Yes. They would. Zuko nodded to the old general, and took off down the street, leaving the whole infuriating band behind.

Iroh sighed in relief as his nephew vanished around a building. Now, to deal with-

"Did you see that nut?" Sokka sputtered as Toph bent him back out of the ground. "Don't do that again! We were about to have crispy-fried Aang-"

"My nephew," Iroh said, in a voice that had cut across parade grounds at need, "was trying to help. Difficult as that may be to believe."

"Oh, sure. Chase us all over the world, and now he's on our side?" Sokka shook his head, wolf-tail whipping fast enough to catch him on the ear. "Ow!"

"No, he's not," Aang said firmly. "He was helping Katara."

"Who, me?" the waterbender said skeptically. "Just because I- um."

"Even so," Iroh nodded graciously. His shoulder was still sore, and likely would be for some time, he imagined. Still, he had no complaints.

That was meant to be a deathblow. Long, lingering, and painful.

Oh, Azula. Have you fallen so far, to please my brother? Or were you always this cruel, and we were all blind?

All, save Ursa and Zuko. *Why* had he never truly believed the boy?

It was too horrible, Iroh admitted to himself. My nephew had already lost his mother. It only seemed reasonable that he would be angry, and blame his rival for Ozai's love. As Ozai felt I was, for our father's. Only... expected.

"Honor's really important in the Fire Nation," Aang was saying. "That's what Kuzon always said."

So you do not know why. Iroh hid a grimace. *And why should you? Roku was an Avatar; he was not bound by a firebender's loyalty. Avatars serve the world, they cannot serve their own clan. How*

Sozin must have ached, knowing one born as his dearest friend was as foreign to him as an airbender in the wind.

Still, the past was done. These children needed his mind on *now*. "Kuzon of Byakko?" Iroh asked.

"Yeah!" Exhausted as they all were, Aang still brightened. "Did you know him? Is that how Zuko healed you? I saw Kuzon doing something with green flames once, but he'd never show me. Even when I asked him a *lot* of times-

"There is no time."

The Avatar's face fell, and Iroh almost regretted his brusqueness. Almost. "Azula will return, and she will not be alone. You must not be here when she does."

"And what about you, Uncle?" Toph asked, jabbing a finger into his unwounded shoulder. "*You'd* better not be here, either."

Uncle. Iroh smiled at the strong little girl. *I do not think I would mind another niece. One who would at least give my nephew a chance to be himself, without always watching for pain.* "Zuko and I have eluded her before. We will be all right."

"Whoa, whoa," Sokka was waving his arms in disbelief, "you're running from *her*?"

"Did you not hear her call us traitors, young man? Which is quite unfair to my nephew. He has always been loyal to the Fire Lord." He gave Aang a piercing look. "He still is."

"So... I guess we should get moving," Aang said reluctantly.

"It would be wise," Iroh said dryly.

"But... you helped us. And I really, really need a firebending teacher-" Aang saw his look, and gulped.

"Avatar Aang," Iroh said, with deliberate finality, "I hope, when next we meet, you will know why what you have asked is cruel."

"I'll say," Toph grumbled. "Don't worry, Uncle. I know enough about the nobles to clue Twinkletoes in." She clapped dust off her hands. "Come on, slowpokes!"

"Wait," Katara said hurriedly. "Uncle... what did Azula take from Zuko?"

Iroh closed his eyes, wrung by grief too worn for tears. "More than you will ever know, child."

"But-"

"Katara, come on!" Sokka hissed. "Creepy ladies. Blue fire. Sleep!"

Footsteps faded, and Iroh breathed a sigh of relief.

"They're gone."

Iroh started, looking about guiltily. Pain distracted one from the stillness needed to feel another firebender's fire, and his nephew was silent enough; that Asahi could almost match him for stealth was a bit unnerving. "Trying to take them would have been-"

"You're wounded. I'm exhausted. And Azula wants us both. I'm determined, Uncle. Not stupid."

Yet tired as he must be, Zuko didn't look angry. Or even resigned. In fact, if Iroh didn't know better.... "And what has you in such a good mood, my nephew?"

Openly smirking, Zuko dropped a hand-sized patch of familiar scales in front of him, one side still raw and bloody. "Guess who's going to be walking in an hour?"

Mongoose dragon scales. The rear thigh, if he remembered their patterns correctly. "But how...?"

"Who's a sweetheart?" Zuko crooned, scratching under a black-feathered beak.

If Iroh didn't know better, he would have sworn Asahi's trill was a chuckle.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Always the same: I own nothing, Vathara owns the story, Avatar is owned by neither of us.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Okay," Sokka said, with what Toph thought was *probably* supposed to be strained patience, but just felt sarcastic. "We're fed, Appa's all shedded out, no crazy ladies or metal monsters in footsie range, and, most important of all, we've all had sleep. Now. Are you going to explain what you meant about knowing nobles, and what that's got to do with Aang asking one of the *less* crazy fire-guys to teach him?"

Toes feeling everyone's place in the loose circle around her, the earthbender frowned, and cracked a nut between two rocks to buy a second to think. Most of the time, she'd just bull through with the blunt truth, and let people's illusions shatter around her. But even though she'd been locked out of sight by her own parents, she'd still managed to slip out for months of earth-rumbles. You met people that way. Good people, weird people, people you never, ever wanted in touching range. And you learned stuff. Some of it stuff that might have turned *really* nasty, if she wasn't the *best*.

These kids? Just look how they'd tried to deal with her parents. They were - well, they weren't *dumb*, but they could stand to learn a few things. "First off," Toph asked, getting her thoughts in order, "why didn't you say *Prince* Zuko, instead of just some angry guy with a ponytail?" Which he didn't even have, anymore; she would have heard his hair swishing around, like she heard Sokka's. And she hadn't.

"So he calls himself a prince," Sokka shrugged. "Big deal. Our dad's a chief. Who cares?"

"It *is* a big deal." Toph stabbed a toe into the dirt, flinging up a pebble to smack him from behind. "There's plenty of kings in cities across the Earth Kingdom, but there's only one Fire Lord. Ozai's got two kids. And we just met *both* of them."

"Zuko's the Fire Lord's son?" Katara said warily.

"Azula's his *sister*?" Sokka squeaked, almost at the same time.

Toph swung her head toward Aang. "You're not surprised."

"She asked if I could see the family resemblance," the airbender admitted reluctantly. Vibrations told her he was clinging to his airstaff. "She thought Zuko's scar was... funny."

"That's what most of the Fire Nation thinks," Toph said sourly. "My parents didn't like me around when they *entertained*, but when you can walk through walls, you overhear lots of stuff. Earth Kingdom merchants like to talk." That some of what she'd overheard had really been from *Fire Nation* merchants - maybe she'd better not lay that little bit of truth on them just yet. The Bei Fongs weren't rich from being stupid. They traded with anybody honest enough to strike a good deal with.

"So you know some stuff about the guy who's chased us all over the planet?" Sokka sounded

reluctantly interested.

"I know he doesn't have a choice," Toph said flatly. "Nobody I heard really knew how he got scarred, but they think it had something to do with why the Fire Lord banished him right after. And everybody who's *anybody* knows he got told he couldn't come back without the Avatar. For three years, it was one big joke. And not the good kind." She pointed toward Aang. "And then you woke up, Twinkletoes, and all of a sudden? People aren't laughing anymore. Prince Zuko just might have a shot to *do* it. You have *any* idea how many people that got mad? Really, *really* mad?"

"Like Azula," Katara whispered.

Huh. Sugar Queen's heartbeat felt way confused. Good. She needed to fall off that high ostrich-horse once in a while. "You got it," Toph nodded sharply. "Zuko's her older brother. He gets out of exile, he could be the heir. He fails - or dies, you don't want to know how many people were sure he'd croak chasing rumors all over the world - *she* gets the throne. And from what people say? She's the one Ozai *wants*. Daddy's little girl, all ready to go out and burn soldiers alive." Toph snorted. "Makes me glad I'm an only child."

"But she's his sister," Aang protested. "Isn't that important?"

"Hey," Sokka patted the airbender on the shoulder. "We all know Zuko's the bad guy. No way would he tell the truth about-"

"He. Wasn't. Lying," Toph ground out. "He was mad, and scared, and just about dead on his feet, but he was *not* lying. I *know* when people are lying."

"You do?"

"You scarfed the last berry-tart out of Katara's bag and blamed it on Momo," Toph said bluntly. "Earth lets me know about people. Zuko's got really good stance; he's probably been training it for *years*. That's why you guys didn't realize you could have knocked him over with a lizard-bird feather."

"And we left him back there with her?" Katara swallowed uneasily.

"Relax," Toph waved. "Now that Uncle knows she's *trying* to kill them, if she does catch them, she won't get off that easy. You don't tick off the Dragon of the West."

"The who?" Sokka said skeptically. "He doesn't look like a dragon to me. Just kind of short, stumpy, follows after Zuko like an old... um." Sokka's heart sped up, as that rock-like (but strangely, unbendable) brain finally let a few conclusions through. "Uncle? Ah. You mean, on Zuko's mother's side. Right?"

Toph grinned at him.

"...Oh, this is *not* cool...."

"Um, raised by monks," Aang put in warily. "Am I missing something?"

"Are you ever." Toph raised a handy rock to lounge against. "The guy you asked to teach you? *General* Iroh. The Dragon of the West. The only firebender who *ever* breached the outer wall of Ba Sing Se." She paused, just to drive the point home. "Fire Lord Ozai's *older brother*."

The airstaff fell from nerveless fingers.

I'm not going to scream at Uncle. I am not going to scream at Uncle.

Singed, blackened, and ears still ringing from the third failed explosion, Zuko punched fire into the ground instead.

"Zuko!"

"Leave me alone!" He clenched the more hateful words behind his teeth; they weren't true, Uncle was *trying* to help, it wasn't Iroh's fault that Azula was perfect at this while he was just-

A failure.

He breathed out pain and flame and the simmering fury of *Uncle was hurt, I couldn't stop her-*

It should have been me.

Another long, shuddering breath of fire, and Zuko sat back, drained. *Going to have to cover the ashes if we want to keep our trail cold. Spirits, that was so stupid....* "I don't think this is going to work."

"You must clear your mind, Prince Zuko. Let go of your shame-"

"I'm not ashamed!" *I know what I am. I try, and I try, and I can't fix it! I'm not ashamed-*

Just angry.

Angry, and tired. And tired of being angry. There had to be something he could *do*.

"If the enemy is too strong to face directly, change your tactics."

Zuko blinked, absently weaving flame between his fingers. "Lightning... the energies are inside."

Iroh sighed, resigned. "Yes, they are. You separate your chi, and-"

Zuko let the flames flicker over his hand. "This is outside. So is healing. I can move my energy, Uncle - but I move it *outside*."

"...Hmm." Iroh stooped to feel through the ashes, rising with a few blackened, glassy lumps.

"Perhaps I have forgotten what it is like to be your age, nephew. Lightning requires calm. And if your temper is anything like mine was then, calm will not come easily for some years."

Zuko blinked at the odd shift of tone. Not the impatience he'd expected from a master faced with a substandard student, but... understanding? "You had a temper?"

"The stories I could tell, could curl an airbender's hair," Iroh said with great satisfaction.

"...They're bald."

"Not without shaving." Uncle looked him over with a considering frown. "But I had thought you were calm, when you healed."

"You did?" Zuko said incredulously.

"It would seem I was mistaken," Iroh said thoughtfully. "You have always seemed quiet, with the

healing fire. Focused."

Zuko eyed him a long moment, then shook his head. "It's not *calm*, Uncle. It's-" He hesitated, reaching into memory for the feel of it. "It's like a fight."

And now Uncle was looking at him *very* strangely.

"It's like fighting *with* someone else." Zuko glanced away, remembering that first touch of flame on Asahi, and how the wounds had seemed to scream a challenge at him. "They're fighting too, but they're just outnumbered. So you step in, and guard their weak side. And you keep fighting until it's *over*." He took a breath. "The energies - what you use is from you, and the fire, but what you're *fixing* is inside. Knots. Sort of. That you're trying to get straight again. Katara... she soaked them, until they loosened up and did what she wanted. I - kind of have to melt them. A little."

Iroh smacked himself in the forehead.

"Uncle?"

"At my age, I should know better than to assume," Iroh said ruefully. "I have another idea."

"So what's got your hair-loops in a knot?"

Hand on the canyon wall, Katara groaned. Aang was snoring the sleep of the earthbending-exhausted, and Sokka was busily cleaning out any scraps left in the cooking pot, but apparently it was too much to hope that Toph's feet would let her brood in peace. "My hair's fine, thanks."

"Sparky, huh?"

"Sparky?" Katara sputtered.

"I've heard a lot about firebenders," Toph shrugged, leaning back against comforting stone. "Never heard of any of 'em who could fix people."

"No," Katara said quietly. "That's just weird. I mean, Master Jeong Jeong said-"

"You met Jeong Jeong the Deserter?" Toph cocked her head, obviously interested.

"He tried to teach Aang firebending," Katara nodded. "That... didn't go so well." She looked down at her unmarked hands. "That was the first time I ever healed myself. He saw me do it; he was the first person to tell me waterbenders *could* heal. I think he would have given anything to be a waterbender instead of fire." She frowned. "It just doesn't make sense! Master Jeong Jeong - well, he wasn't nice. He was hard, like Master Pakku at the North Pole. But he was a good man. Why should *Zuko*-" She cut herself off.

"Masters don't know everything," Toph said seriously. "Mine thought I was still working on kiddie moves." She stirred dirt with her toes, a sandy whirlpool. "Don't tell Aang this, but some of my serious stuff? I kind of got started on by accident. Just to see what I could *do*. So I can pull moves other benders think are *impossible*. 'Cause nobody told me I couldn't."

Katara stared at her. "You think Zuko figured out how to heal by *accident*?"

"Why not? You did."

That... actually made sense. Kind of. "It just seems crazy," Katara shook her head. "I *know* what

fire does, it-" Her throat tightened. *Mom.*

"It's like Azula?" Toph said wryly. "Hey, if you think *you're* confused, what do you think *he* feels like?"

"I don't care what that jerk feels like!" Katara snapped. "He came to our home, he threatened Gran-Gran, he's *always* trying to hurt us, and Aang-"

"I could go home," Toph said matter-of-factly.

Katara rolled her eyes. "If this is about the camp chores...."

"No. *I* could go home. You and Sokka - you could go home. If you really wanted. And now you're thinking about how Sparky can't, and it's got you twisty as a nest of dragon-flies."

"Well, *Aang* can't go home either!" Katara bit out. "And who can we blame for that?"

"Is Zuko really a hundred years old?" Toph said wryly. "'Cause I gotta tell you, Sugar Queen, he sure doesn't move like it."

"But it was the *Fire Nation!*"

"This time." Toph snorted. "Never had to sit through history lessons, huh? Check out Chin the Conqueror. If *he* could've gotten up to the Air Temples, you *bet* he would have."

"And they didn't do anything to him, either!"

"Yeah. They didn't. Nice, peaceful guys, right? Didn't do anything to him. Didn't do anything to stop him. People kind of don't like other people sitting back and watching them get creamed." Toph looked straight at her, blind eyes serious. "I don't exactly do maps. But last I heard, the Air Temples aren't *in* the Fire Nation. They're on big mountains, right? Surrounded by the Earth Kingdom. Or up near the poles. Which means Water Tribe territory."

"So?" Katara said, puzzled.

"So. *Who* let the Fire Nation get *to* those mountains?"

Katara swallowed, chilled. "You're wrong. You don't know my father. You don't know anything!"

"I know your father's not a hundred years old, either," Toph shrugged. "You going to tell me I'm wrong, Snoozles?"

Katara smiled as her brother wandered their way, scratching the back of his head with a thoughtful scowl. Her big brother, would-be warrior, pretty much a good guy when he wasn't thinking with his stomach-

And then he had to open his mouth.

"Well, Dad wouldn't have," Sokka frowned. "But Gran-Gran's a lot older than any of us, and she left the North Pole for some kind of good reason."

"Sokka!" Katara exclaimed.

"Hey, you know what you had to go through to get Master Pakku to teach you waterbending," her brother pointed out. "And they were going to use eighty-five-year-old Fire Nation armor to try and sneak into the fleet. They didn't even know it changed!"

"So?" Katara griped, folding her arms.

"So, what do we really know about the Fire Nation? Besides the fact that they *did* start the war, they *are* after Aang, and Zuko's so stubborn even a city full of waterbenders couldn't keep him down. Well, him and his uncle," Sokka amended. "And that's... weird. Interesting, but weird."

Katara snorted. "Believe me, Sokka, *nothing* about that jerk is interesting."

"Still mad he tied you to that tree, huh?"

"I'll save you from the pirates." That high-handed, arrogant, over-confident-

"Ooo!" Toph bounced. "You've got to tell me about that!"

"Never mind about the tree!" Katara snapped. "I can't *believe* you're still thinking about him. *Or* his uncle!"

"I kind of can't believe you're not," Sokka said seriously. "Iroh told us something important." He held up a finger for emphasis. "Remember how he said Azula thinks they're traitors? And that wasn't fair to *his nephew*?"

"I *really* could care less what's fair to Zuko, Sokka," Katara grumbled.

"He *didn't* say it wasn't fair to *him*."

"Whoa. Good point," Toph said. "He helped you guys at the North Pole, right? Which kind of squashed Admiral Zhao's whole invasion flat. He really *is* a traitor."

Katara let her arms fall, unable to argue. "But Zuko trusts him." She frowned. "And he said he wouldn't help Aang."

"He's not going to *teach* Aang," Sokka said, with what was meant to be a wise and knowing air. "Doesn't mean he won't help, next time we run into them."

"Next time?" Toph asked.

"Oh, yeah," Katara sighed. "With Zuko? There's *always* a next time."

"All this four elements talk is sounding like Avatar stuff," Zuko said warily.

Meaning he was treading on the very thinnest ice of his nephew's willingness to listen, Iroh knew. Lifting a hand from his dirt drawing, he tossed another twig to the small fire he'd built in Zuko's seared pit; deliberate distraction, to ease the singing tension. The Avatar was the bridge to the spirit world - and the spirits had ever been less than kind to his nephew.

Well. Except, perhaps, in one instance. Asahi browsed in and out of view, clearly unworried by any fire so long as it was theirs.

"It is the combination of the four elements in one person that makes the Avatar so powerful," Iroh agreed. "But a true Avatar's power is rooted in more than just bending. The Avatar was meant to travel the world, and teach each nation of the others, so none of us forgot why we need each other. He saw the ways of each people, and so we saw them in him. For sometimes it is only by looking at another that we can see the truth of ourselves."

"I don't understand."

Nor do I. Not as I had thought I did, Iroh thought. "I have been considering what you said, nephew. And I believe I may have an answer. But to be certain - and I must be certain - I will need you to do something very difficult."

Zuko sat up straight, determined. "I'm ready."

"Good," Iroh nodded. Waved at the fire. "Imagine a small child, who has just started to firebend. Like yourself, perhaps, when Lu Ten was your age. Teach him to heal."

"Uncle?" The unscarred eye was wide.

"Imagine, nephew," Iroh said gently. "Imagine that I ask for him, why does this work? How do I begin?"

Zuko stared into the fire, silent.

Perhaps it is too soon. I hoped not, but what Azula did to both of us... betrayal cuts deep.

"Fire wants to fight."

Iroh sat back, listening.

"It wants to fight, and it wants to burn." Zuko frowned, feeling his way through words. "If you want it to be more, you have to give it part of you. You have to flow with it. It's like... if firebending is being the captain of the ship, healing is turning it so you don't get swamped by the rogue wave. You get what you need, but you're not - all the way in control." He paused, shaking his head. "Fire is a rhythm, a heartbeat. It knows how to dance, it just doesn't know what dance you need it to do. You have to show it the steps. It's you, and the fire - and you're not trying to *match* it, not like breathing. You're trying to find a rhythm you can both fit. And then it's you and the fire and the person you're healing, and that gets complicated, and sometimes you trip a little. But you care, you have to care - and if you just keep going, it'll work." Zuko blew out a breath, obviously not happy with his own words.

Look outside yourself, indeed, Iroh thought, smiling. Dancing, especially with a partner, was a habit of other peoples, not the Fire Nation.

And why should it be otherwise? Other benders must find their element outside themselves. We carry ours within. Which is why those like Zhao proclaim us superior. And perhaps we are - in combat, in killing.

But in our dances, we dance alone.

"It seems a place to start," Iroh nodded. "Now. Show me."

Eyeing him doubtfully, Zuko beckoned to the fire-

Stopped. Took a breath, and reached out again with both hands. Slowly.

Shaping a fireball, Iroh thought, watching intently. *But he called it from the fire, not himself, and he has not separated it wholly from the flames. And he is adding his own energy to it. Much like a waterbender, riding a wave.*

Ball of flames between his palms, sparks trailing to the fire, Zuko began moving his hands in slow,

opposing circles. Glints of green caught and spread, ribbons reaching out to wreath his hands.

It is like the dao, Iroh realized. They do not move exactly as one. As two halves of a whole, yes. But one is sometimes faster, or slower. And sometimes they are near to block a single enemy, while at others, they separate to fight a host of opponents.

A fight. A heartbeat. A dance. If there were something less akin to the calm separation of lightning-bending, he had never seen it.

Zuko took the opportunity to reach back and run flames over the bruises from his meeting with the street, and let the fire in his hands die. "I guess that's it."

Nodding, Iroh reached out to the fire himself.

This is not as easy as it looks.

Training said to keep his movements precise, sharp, controlled. To establish boundaries between himself and the flame. Fire, taught the masters, was anger, destruction, deadly passion. It could not be left to rage unchecked.

But Iroh had seen dragon's fire. And yes, rage was in it - but also warmth, compassion, friendship. Even the rage was no cold thrill in destruction, but desperate love of what they fought to protect.

Flow with the flame. Let it be part of you. Care.

It seared inside, like the times he'd snuck into hidden caverns to try to bend lava. Not so much physical pain, as of the spirit; he'd ached for his family and his people so very long....

It was the searing that kicked in training again; fortunately his own, and not any gained from Sozin's teachings. *Live! Let the energy flow. In, down, up, out-*

Green blazed between his hands, before it shattered apart.

"Uncle!" Soothing warmth kneaded his shoulder, sinking in to his heart. "You - you weren't breathing right...."

Iroh drew a deliberate breath, and felt the flow of his own chi. A bit uneven, but Zuko's efforts were mending that. "The technique," he said wryly, "is not so harmless to the student as it appears."

"Not harmless? What did you *do*?"

Green flickered away again from Zuko's hands, and Iroh leaned gratefully on his nephew. "On the bright side, it appears that I am right. And for that, I am sorry. I am truly sorry, nephew. It has been in plain view for years, and I did not see."

Zuko's fingers felt for his pulse. "Uncle, are you sure you're all right? Because you're not making sense."

Iroh chuckled ruefully. "I am, no thanks to my own training. Zuko. When you change the fire to heal, you leave its energies linked to the flames. And to yourself. This is not what firebending teaches."

Zuko stiffened, pulling back. "So I'm doing it wrong."

"No!" Iroh gripped his shoulders, holding the young man before he could escape back into doubt and pain. "No, nephew. You are doing it *right*! I did it as firebenders are taught; I controlled the

flow, precisely. And like the rogue wave on the sea, it is not meant to be so tamed."

"Your heart." Zuko was desperately pale. "You have to feel it with your heart, and...."

"Yes," Iroh nodded, relieved to have finally - finally! - gained a clear view of his enemy's position. And if his intuition was correct, it might yet become an ally instead, if he were clever enough. "The heart has a rhythm as well. Control the fire too tightly, it turns on those rhythms of your own it can reach." *And I thought only lightning could so stop a heart.*

Which led to grim thoughts of exactly what Ursa might have done... no. His father's death was the past. Zuko's life was here, and now. "You did it right, Zuko," Iroh said simply. And laughed at himself, ruefully. "Which means, of course, I have been teaching you firebending as I might calligraphy, left-handed."

Zuko gave him a look askance. "Did you get hit with a boomerang when I wasn't looking?"

"Listen to me, nephew," Iroh said patiently. He couldn't blame the boy for his doubts. Any other master would swear he'd been sunstruck. But if he closed his eyes to the lessons of Sozin and Azulon, and looked at what his nephew had actually done.... "To throw fire together with another bender is a fundamental technique, yet it remains one of the most difficult. Many do not even bother to master it. Why should they, when we can order the mass fire of hundreds? But at the South Pole we threw, and you did not hesitate."

"I know my basics, yes, thank you, Uncle-"

"Hush, and listen," Iroh directed. "When you faced Zhao, I worried he had you; yet with one spin you shattered his fire and his stance. I have known masters who could not have struck that blow. When you raised fire about Azula, why did she not wrest it away the instant it burned? Unless she *could* not, until she forced herself free with all her strength. And now, when you heal...." He let go, and smiled. "What do these fires have in common?"

Zuko swallowed. "They're outside." He grimaced. "But that's not how it's supposed to be."

"At the moment, I believe we should be less concerned with proper style, and more with what will work if Azula does bring reinforcements." Iroh nodded toward the dao resting by their packs. "Is that not why you learned swords as well?"

Zuko's fists clenched. "I just - wanted to be good at something."

"And so you are," Iroh said firmly. *You are good, nephew. Not a master, perhaps; but you are only sixteen. Give yourself time.*

Azula was chasing them. Sozin's Comet was coming. Time, they did not have.

"Do not discount your gifts, Prince Zuko," Iroh said instead. "They may yet save your life. There is a firebending technique neither Azula nor my brother know, and it depends on something very much like what I have seen you do."

"There's a move the Fire Lord doesn't know?" Zuko said warily.

Iroh smiled. "He doesn't know, because I made it up myself." He dropped his nephew a wink. "I was studying waterbenders years before Katara drew your attention, nephew."

"Drew my *attention*?" Zuko sputtered. "She buried me in ice in the middle of a *blizzard*, Uncle!"

"You should have seen what my Natsu did when I was your age," Iroh said fondly. "Ah, what a fiery chase she led me, before she caught me!"

"Uncle." Zuko was gripping the bridge of his nose in the exasperated way that meant he'd decided this was another bout of temporary insanity, which just might pass if he waited it out. "She's *Water Tribe*. She is *not* waiting to ambush me with a red cord and three cups of wine. Trust me."

"Ah, a shame," Iroh sighed gustily. Mentally chalking another point on his side of the tally: one distraction, complete. "Well. The cold fire is powerful, and certainly impressive, but it has a weakness. More than any flame, it is energy, and it seeks the path of least resistance. If you let the energy in your own body flow, the lightning will follow." He stood. "Let us begin."

In, down, up, out, Zuko chanted to himself as they practiced through the afternoon, shifting the flow of energy as he moved. Trying not to think of that flash of pure fear, as he'd stared Azula's sparkling death in the face-

Before Uncle had stepped between them, and redirected her bolt into the cliff.

He saved me. I didn't even realize what he did, not then - too scared, too angry - but he did.

Next time, I want to save myself.

In, down, up, out.

It was and wasn't like healing. Healing was a dance, a partnership, both sides trading off the lead. This was more like Jun the bounty hunter's whip, snapping out against danger. But it was still a flow. *A pattern.*

It makes sense.

He could feel the technique, solid as any of the basics Uncle had taught him. This was how it would flow. How it would *work*. "I'm ready."

"Ready?" Uncle Iroh said incredulously, dropping out of stance. "What, are you crazy?"

"I have to know it works, Uncle!"

"And if it does not?" Iroh blazed. "I have lost my son; I will not lose you as well! If you are lucky, you will never need this move in your life!"

He's angry. He never gets angry. Zuko clenched his fists, unwilling to back down. "When have I ever been lucky, Uncle?"

Silence, stretching taut between them as gold warred with gold. "No," Iroh said flatly, every inch the Dragon of the West. "You are not ready."

I need this! It was all the banished prince could do not to scream. *I need this, Uncle. I need to win. I need to beat her!*

...I need to be good enough. Just once.

Breathe. Bite back the anger, even if smoke rose from between his clenched fingers. "Azula's after us, Uncle. If she brings troops - if she gets us separated...." Zuko swallowed hard, pride burning like acid. "If she does that, I'm dead anyway."

I'm not good enough to take her. I never have been. All I can try to do is stay alive.

All we can do is run.

It wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair. The rage burned in him like lava, demanding to blaze free....

It's never been fair, Zuko reminded himself, forcing the anger back. And I don't care. I'll make my own destiny. Whatever it takes.

Uncle sighed, anger draining away like water, leaving him worn and tired. "You make a good argument, Prince Zuko. I will consider it."

Zuko let out a breath of relief. "Thank you, Uncle-"

"No!" Iroh slashed a hand across, trailing smoke. "If you wish me to risk your life, you will earn it! You will practice. You will listen to me. And for once in your life, you will *wait*, until I say you are ready!"

Zuko swallowed, shaken. Uncle Iroh was always calm, always controlled. To see him half-raise fire without even thinking about it.... He shivered.

Iroh sighed once more. "We are tired," he went on, more quietly. "And healed or not, a fight like that we faced yesterday would drain trained soldiers, much less-"

"You don't have to explain, Uncle." Biting his lip, Zuko bowed, student to master.

And tried not to flinch, as Iroh's arms closed around him.

"I love you, nephew," Iroh said softly. "I do not tell you that enough. If I could, I would stand between you and harm forever. But you are right. I cannot." One hand lifted, brushing back unfamiliar short hair. "I can only give you the skills to protect yourself, and pray."

Uncle's hand in his hair. It should have been comforting. *It was.*

And somehow, that made it even worse.

No familiar weight of a phoenix-tail. No breeze across shaved skin. Clothes that weren't meant to be worn with armor; that weren't even red. No taste of salt, no coal smoke, no sway of the ship under him....

Nothing was right in the world. Nothing.

"I'm sorry, Uncle," Zuko choked out, hating the tear that trickled from his good eye. "If I hadn't chased him to the pole, you wouldn't have been with Zhao. Our crew wouldn't have- they couldn't call you a traitor-" He swallowed hard, words a bare whisper. "I just wanted to go home."

"I know, nephew. I know." A chuckle against his shoulder. "And you may underestimate Lieutenant Jee. Our crew has seen the Avatar unleashed before. If anyone had a chance to survive that fury, they did." Iroh let go, and nodded. "Come. We can make some more distance, before dark."

So it begins.

Lying awake beside Asahi's warmth, Iroh looked over at his nephew. Even in sleep, Zuko frowned,

huddled on himself, hands clenching and unclenching on the bedroll.

"I just wanted to go home."

Zuko knew. He had not admitted it to himself, not yet. But he knew.

We can never go home again. Iroh smiled wryly. *Perhaps I should almost get killed by Azula more often.*

Though he doubted matters would have gone this well, had Zuko not been able to heal him. Azula had won the physical fight, but Zuko had denied her the victory. It gave him strength. A place to stand, to be certain of himself, when all the world seemed to fall apart around him.

And it will.

All his life, Zuko had tried to please his father. To win, by painful effort, the approval Azula seemed to gain simply by breathing. To admit that they could not go home, would be to admit he had failed. That he had not - could not - wring love from Fire Lord Ozai's heart of stone.

I love you, Zuko. I wish that were enough.

Futile wish. A child's first love and loyalty was to his parents, always - and while soldiers might put that as second to their commander's orders, the Fire Lord was the crown prince's commander. Exiled or not.

To admit the truth, will break my nephew's heart.

But would it break his loyalty? That, above all, was the question.

Well, no, Iroh admitted to himself. *Whether or not Azula will catch us - all else will hinge on that.*

So. First, avoid the she-devil on their trail. Though if they were lucky, Azula would leave them for later, pursuing glory from her father by seeking the Avatar's head.

...Not that he wished the young airbender harm. Quite the opposite, despite that horror at the North Pole. The boy was twelve. He could not, truly, have known what he was unleashing, allowing the Ocean Spirit his way with all an Avatar's power.

Hope that is so, Iroh told himself grimly, recalling torn ships and bodies, awash in the sea. Remembering weeks trapped on the raft with Zuko's nightmares and his own. *Hope he did not know, and that he will never do so again. The consequences, otherwise....*

Well. There were reasons beyond family he had trained Zuko, and followed his nephew on what seemed a fool's quest. Reasons Aang had best hope he never learned.

Still. Young Aang had friends, and allies, and a flying bison. He and Zuko had only each other and one stubborn ostrich-horse. And with Sozin's Comet on the way, they were running out of time-

Iroh sat up suddenly.

"Mmph? Uncle?"

"Only thinking, nephew. Go to sleep."

"Mmph...."

Leaning back as his nephew settled, Iroh probed at that sudden thought. Sozin's Comet would arrive by the end of summer. After that-

After that, it would be the Avatar against the Fire Lord. One would win. If that one were the Avatar, his nephew would be safe. If it were not....

We would have to run again. But the comet does not last forever.

We do not know where the Avatar has gone. And even my nephew will not strike out blindly. If I can only keep us moving....

No. No, that would not do; Azula was moving, and the Avatar was definitely traveling, and the more they themselves crossed the land, the more chances the spirits had to arrange another meeting between all of them.

Iroh was *not* feeling charitable toward spirits, at the moment.

We are in the Earth Kingdom, and we should take a lesson from the badger-mole. Go to ground, and hide.

Easy to say. Far more difficult to do. The Earth Kingdom and the Fire Nation were locked in war, territory changing hands with each shift of the tide. Nowhere was safe-

Iroh drew in a sharp breath. It hurt; even all these years later, it hurt. But he steeled himself. Considered the option. And nodded.

Ba Sing Se.

Those walls had not fallen to his assault. They would hold. At least until the comet came.

Still. To venture there, where he would never escape memories of a young man who had never had the chance to give him grandchildren... he shook his head.

"Father," Zuko murmured in his sleep. "Please...."

Almost against his will, Iroh's fists clenched. Deliberately, the old general called to mind those high walls, those proud earthbenders, the whole massive edifice that had denied him victory.

You took my son. Iroh let out a quiet, angry breath of flame. *Let us see if you can save my nephew.*

Chapter End Notes

A/N: If bloodbending is internal waterbending, why shouldn't firebending - as it is currently practiced - have had similar origins? All the other elements involve external control of an existing substance. It'd make a lot of sense if firebending started the same way... and then evolved, into the internally-controlled fire which can be much more handy for combat.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

A/N: Warning, violence.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

I'm starting to not like roads, Zuko thought darkly, touching the side of Asahi's neck to keep her quiet. The sounds from up around that blind corner were... not good.

On the one hand, roads meant people. Asahi needed grain to stay her best, and while he might be getting better at hunting, people couldn't live by meat alone. And letting Uncle try to gather wild plants was *not happening*. Roads meant towns, farms, trading posts. Places they could trade skills or just willingness to work for a few meals or coin.

On the other hand... roads meant people. With all their *lovely* habits.

"Three at least," Iroh estimated quietly, as they snuck closer. "No more than seven, or we would hear more. They waited around the corner for their victims - a light wagon, hmm...."

Smart place for an ambush. A blind, sharp turn, as the road bent around a tall outcrop of dust-brown stone. Brush crept up on the road's other side, making flight that direction a difficult choice, in those first critical moments of surprise. Zuko did *not* want to go around that corner. Not if there were any chance one of the attackers had enough sense to keep watch.

"Mommy!"

"Go!" Iroh dropped back, already plotting his own assault. "Find the child!"

Sort out who're the bad guys later, Zuko knew, urging Asahi into a sprint. They rounded the bend, and she skipped sideways, dodging the lump in the road-

The body.

Earth Kingdom brown, splotted with red from an arrow driven all the way through. And never mind, it wasn't moving, worry about it later. The handful of people around the wagon with its stolid draft ostrich-horse were moving, and he had his dao out and separated before the spearman could even register there was a new fighter-

Bandits. Spearman. Two with swords, holding an older woman. One in the wagon, on the girl.

Meaning snatch, grab, and ride wouldn't work. And Asahi wasn't combat-trained. One of many reasons he hadn't taken her near Azula.

Zuko launched himself from her back instead, trusting the hen's *truly* rotten temper toward strangers to keep her out of grasping hands. The first whirling strike bisected the bandit's spear before it could come to bear.

The second took his head.

Swordsmen. Letting the woman go, now, going for steel, but Zuko wasn't worried about them. Not as much as he was about the bow and quiver laid in grabbing range against the side of the wagon. Probably by the bastard just rising to his feet in the back, surprised at the sudden shouting.

Green and tan wriggled away, still shrieking.

So small. She's just a little girl-

The distraction almost cost him. Zuko dodged the first wild swing, and parried the next few with a flourish of what appeared to be completely unnecessary footwork. *Letting* them drive him away from the wagon, and their probable leader.

And smirked, as the pair suddenly realized that impressive bow had been kicked far too many yards away.

"Zhen!" The bruised woman bolted around them, heading for the shrieks with desperate determination.

"Back off, woman!" Steel flashed, as the disarmed archer grabbed for the struggling girl. "You, boy! Put the swords down."

And have you cut her throat anyway? Zuko glared back. "No."

The woman froze in place, face flashing between fear and hate. "You can't! My baby-!"

"Let her go," Zuko said grimly. "Now."

"Are you deaf?" the bandit snorted. "Put them down, or the girl-"

Bloodied fletching sprouted from his throat.

"A bit high." Iroh's voice carried across the battlefield as the incredulous bandit choked on his own blood. "It would seem I am badly out of practice."

The swordsmen hesitated, looking at Zuko. Looking *past* him.

Zuko waited, knees bent, blades out and ready. Smirking, to hide the uncertainty of, *Uncle only had that one shot....*

They bolted.

"Let them go!" Iroh ordered, before he could leap after them. "We may still be able to save this man."

"Heng!" Zhen in her arms, the woman glanced back toward the fallen man, torn.

"Get your supplies!" Zuko ordered, shaking off his blades before he sheathed them. He jumped into the wagon, and hauled the dead weight out. "We need to move!"

Terrified, she jumped. And started grabbing what had been scattered onto the road; bundles of roots, dried plants, and what looked like odder things. Some of them looked familiar, he just couldn't think from where.

Whistling for Asahi, Zuko helped Uncle manhandle the unconscious merchant across her back, then down again into the wagon bed. Stooped, and tossed the quiver in as well.

They're going to be back.

"Can you drive, Madam?" Uncle asked with courteous haste as he climbed into the back. "Asahi will follow, and I need to help my nephew with your husband."

"He's bleeding so bad...." Pale, she grabbed the harness reins and snapped them, one arm still wrapped around Zhen.

"Mommy! They're hurting Daddy!"

"Hush, little one! Don't look back."

"But they're *bad*-"

"Zhen, quiet!"

It probably *did* look like they were hurting him, Zuko knew, wincing as Iroh's knife cut free the bloodstained inner robe. Shoulder wounds weren't good at the best of times, and Uncle hadn't had time to be gentle yanking that arrow out.

Too much blood. No way is just a bandage going to be enough.

Uncle grimaced, obviously reaching the same conclusion. "We cannot risk it," he murmured regretfully. Raised his voice. "How far is the next town, Madam-"

"Hot water," Zuko said abruptly.

"Lee, what-?"

"Hot *water*, Uncle. For clean bandages!"

"Ah!" Iroh went to work, bracing a pot against the jouncing of the road, lighting a few precious pieces of coal inside it, and tucked his teapot atop the flames. "Will this work?" he murmured warily.

"I have to try." *It works with rocks. It works with my own fire. Water can't be that different.*

I won't let it be.

Soak one of their bandages in boiling water. Press it into the wound, with the same circular flow he used on fire. Pick up the bits of fire still singing through steaming cloth, and guide them into the dance. Dive into the worst knots, and soften them, and *hold*, until Uncle could pass him another cloth.

It was like trying to climb sheer rock with his fingertips. But he'd done that, too.

Soak and melt and hold. Soak and melt and *hold*....

And somehow the sun had slipped a handspan across the sky, and Uncle was shaking him. "Lee. Lee! Stop. Stop now."

Zuko blinked, looking at red, raw flesh. Still gouged. Still not *whole*. "But-"

"Enough," Uncle said flatly. "He will live." Iroh gently shoved him down, onto canvas covering fragrant roots, away from drying blood. "Rest."

But they could be back-

He was out before he hit the canvas.

"Is your son going to be all right?"

Iroh lifted his hand from Zuko's pulse; strong and steady, if a bit fast. "Lee is my nephew." He smiled slightly. "And he will be. Master-?"

"Heng Mu." The merchant grimaced as the road jarred his bandaged shoulder. "Dyes and spices. This is my wife, Nuan, and our daughter Zhen-"

"You get away from Daddy *right now!*"

"Zhen, that's enough," Nuan ordered. Looked over her shoulder for just a moment of heartsick gratitude. "Thank you, sir. Spirits bless the both of you. Even if-" She swallowed hard, and turned back to the road.

"Your mother's right, Zhen," Heng stated. "They were helping us. Even if I don't know exactly what you did..." He left the question hanging, green eyes curious despite the pain.

"They hurt you! And the ugly one, with the swords, he-" The young girl shivered, hiding her face in her mother's arm.

"We'll talk about it *later*." He gave Iroh a hard look, and lowered his voice. "Just what did my daughter see?"

"More than enough," Iroh said firmly, matching his low quiet. "She will have nightmares, I think. Treat her kindly. She will not forget, but time will reassure her that you all live."

Heng frowned toward Zuko. "My daughter usually doesn't call anyone ugly."

Iroh sighed. "It is likely she saw him dispose of the spearman." He shrugged. "My nephew does not enjoy defending himself with such force. Even so, he is good at it. Fortunately for all of us."

"Dispose of- He's a boy!"

"A pity, that the war does not care." Iroh raised an inquiring brow. "Will it be far to the next town? It is good to have company on the road, but I would like to know how likely it may be that the two who fled will try their luck again."

"Two?" Heng said uneasily. "I thought there were four."

"There were," Iroh agreed mildly.

Heng stared at him. Opened his mouth-

Shut it again, paler than blood loss could account for. "Oma and Shu. You're F-"

"Please." Iroh met his gaze, knowing what he saw. *We can hide our bending, but we can never hide our eyes.* "The arrow was within a finger of your heart. If Lee had not healed you, you would never have woken."

"Healed?" Heng said, dazed. Looked at Zuko. And the bandages. And the teapot.

Blinked, and looked back at Iroh with mingled shock and amazement. "How did a *waterbender* get born in the *Fire Nation*?"

"Ah." Iroh leaned back, smiling genially. "That, is a very long story...."

"That's the bow, all right," the Earth Kingdom Guard said grimly, gripping it in one gloved hand. "Cut-Horse Meng. We'll have to send a patrol out for the body. Good riddance, if it is him." The man's mustache wrinkled in distaste. "You might want to light some incense to Guan Yin. If those healers hadn't come along when they did... that filth has a record when it comes to little girls."

"I was already planning to, but..." Heng swallowed dryly. "Yes. I'm very glad they found us."

"Why can't lowlifes like that go off and die fighting the Fire Nation, that's what I'd like to know," the guard grumbled. "Animals deserve animals."

"Is there anything else you need to know today?" Heng asked humbly. "My wife and daughter are... well, I'm sure you can imagine. We were going to be staying in town to sell for a few days anyway, even before this." He lifted a hand, not quite touching his bandaged shoulder. "I don't think I'll be up to the road for a while."

"Mu's Dyes and Spices, right?" The guard looked a bit less grim. "My wife's been looking for a good fast jade green, whatever that means. I don't suppose you'd have any advice?"

Three sales and some frank advice on cheap fabric tricks later, Heng finally escaped into the twilight, ducking into the inn stable to check on Sand. And their - rescuers. Odd as that thought was. "He's still asleep?"

"Asleep again," Mushi corrected, patting the black hen curled protectively next to his nephew. "He woke enough for dinner. Thank you for sending Madam Nuan with it. I would prefer not to leave Lee alone among strangers. Sometimes, it seems he attracts bad luck."

"Is that how he got that scar?"

Mushi's gaze rested on him, calm as a saber-moose lion stalking its prey.

Heng raised a hand to fend off... he didn't know what. Mushi *couldn't* be a firebender. He'd used a bow, hadn't he? Everybody knew firebenders were too proud of their element to use steel. "I just want to understand," he said honestly. "You said it was a long story, and then you just say it's probably from his mother. I can understand why you're hiding, and that you don't want my wife to know-"

"I was more concerned with your daughter."

"Zhen?" Heng said in disbelief. "Why?"

"We frightened her, and she nearly lost you," Mushi said frankly. "If she knew something that would bring trouble to us - and she is young, she would not realize the consequences would be far worse - well. It is better not to take the chance."

"Oh." He hadn't even thought of that. Zhen was *eleven*. She'd never really want to hurt anyone.

But she was scared.

"I'll talk to her," Heng stated. "But she's not here now. And - a *waterbender*?"

Mushi sighed, and shrugged. "His mother could heal. I knew, but I said nothing. I knew my brother's temper. And she was a wonderful person. Kind, strong, and honorable. I thought she would temper my brother. Give him a balance he lacked." He shook his head. "Something went wrong. I am still uncertain of what. I was... away. When I returned - I should have taken Lee and left, then." Gold eyes met his squarely. "My brother is a firebender. A strong one. To think his son was simply powerless was disappointment enough. To discover the truth-" He winced, and sighed.

Heng swallowed, eyes drawn to the ridges of scar under dark hair. "Are you saying, his *father*...."

"Lee does not speak of it." Sadness shadowed Mushi's face, mixed with a cold, terrible anger. "He knows a score of firebending forms; they are useful for defense, even for one who cannot bend. But not one of water. He could not heal himself. When he was well enough to move, I took him. We have not returned to the Fire Nation since."

Spirits, what a nightmare. And yet - something didn't ring right. "So why were you lost?" Heng said cautiously. "You don't seem like the kind of man who ends up not knowing where he is."

"I do not? Ah." Mushi rubbed at his left shoulder ruefully. "Unfortunately, my nephew is not an only child."

Heng had to lean on a stall door. "I don't really want to know, do I?"

"Let us just say, we misjudged the tides of war," Mushi said dryly. "We were recognized, and fled. With only what you see. Though I am grateful even for that. Still, we did not escape unscathed." He regarded Heng soberly. "Yours is the second mortal wound Lee has healed in a week."

No wonder they were jumpy. Well, besides the obvious. "He needs a teacher."

"Hiding in the Earth Kingdom is difficult enough," Mushi observed. "I do not think we could pass at the North Pole."

"Who said anything about the poles?" Heng chuckled, thinking of the odd dyestuffs that came out of the Foggy Swamp. And the even odder people who traded them. Oh, the women were graceful enough, neatly dressed as any Earth Kingdom villager, if exotically different. But the men, especially if they were on a hunting trip... *Augh, my eyes!* Heng thought ruefully. "Ice isn't the only water in the world."

"That is true," Mushi allowed. "But the ports are never safe."

And they'd never fit in at the swamps, Heng knew, after a moment more to think about it. They might look the part, except for the eyes - but that accent would be a dead giveaway. Accent on *dead*. "There's still one port that is."

Mushi straightened. "The inland sea of Ba Sing Se."

Heng nodded. "I don't know for sure, but I've heard there are healing waterbenders there. I know some people travel to the city, if they can, if ordinary healers can't handle their sickness."

"Hmm." Mushi stroked his beard thoughtfully.

Heng winced, suddenly remembering a problem. "But you need documents to get into the city, and-"

"Do not worry, Master Mu. There are ways." Mushi was considering the problem with the same abstract air he'd seen in the most skilled Pai Sho players. "What else do you know of the waterbenders?"

"They like blue?" Heng said uncertainly. "I've never been to Ba Sing Se."

"But you know those who have?" Mushi inquired.

"Well...."

Mushi smiled. "Well, indeed. Tell me of someone who has been there, and what they said of what they found."

"Did you mean it?"

Just back from seeing Heng off to his family, Iroh sighed. *I should have known better than to expect him to sleep while I talked to strangers.* "If we can find a waterbender who heals, perhaps we can-"

"About... Father."

Oh. "I did," Iroh said quietly, entering the stall to look his nephew in the eye. "Your mother was a ray of sunshine in the midst of clouds. Her presence eased the heart; her smile was the rainbow. Even the coldest soul, I believed, must warm and thaw to her."

"But he didn't." Gold eyes closed, still weary.

"No," Iroh sighed. "She was sunshine in the falling rain, and then she was gone... like the tales of the dragon-wife...."

"Uncle?"

I am tired, Iroh thought ruefully. *I should never have said that.* "Only an old man's wandering thoughts, nephew. Sometimes, when the world seems coldest, the old stories give us hope."

"Maybe." Zuko gave him another skeptical look, before settling back into the straw. "But she wasn't a dragon, Uncle. I think somebody would have *noticed* if I came out of an egg." He took a breath, let it sigh out in a whisper. "Besides. Everybody knows dragon-children were special."

And you, who can heal, are not? But Iroh kept quiet, letting his nephew sink back into restless sleep. Zuko was in no mood to hear comfort. He had saved a life today, yes - but he had also taken one. And that never became easier. Not for any soul who still claimed a heart.

He could still feel the bow's grip in his grasp, see the spray of blood as the arrow sank home. It'd been years, but he'd never quite forgotten the archery lessons that were part of every Fire Nation noble's training.

Well, almost every noble's. His nephew was a rare exception. Archery was not easily practiced on board a ship. And even before his exile, Zuko had never taken to the bow.

Dragons have always hated archers.

Ridiculous thought. Truly. Zuko was correct. *Someone* would have noticed if Prince Ozai's firstborn had-

"Like trying to hatch a stone," Ursa's voice echoed in memory.

An old legend. Hidden, like those stories the Fire Nation never spoke of to outsiders: that the gold eyes many feared as inhuman truly were. For it was said the first firebenders had been no mere mortals learning from dragons, but a dragon's own children....

The Avatar has returned, after a century of silence. Powers are stirring. Spirits are moving.

Still. His Zuko? Lady Ursa had never been unfaithful. He would stake his soul on that. Zuko *was* his brother's son.

But whose daughter was she?

He hadn't recalled it before, but Lady Kotone's relations with her husband *had* been rumored to be... odd....

No. Impossible, Iroh decided, making his own nest in straw to seek sleep.

And yet....

Spirits. If you stacked the deck against my nephew before he was even born, we need to have a very long talk.

A turtle-duckling crying in the reeds, blood and the knife coming down-

Zuko woke with a strangled gasp in the gray darkness, straw rustling through his fingers. No pond. No blood. No little girl's life riding on his desperate guess at the right thing to do.

Nightmare. You knew you'd have them.

Close to dawn. No point in trying to go back to sleep. Zuko crept out of his bedding, drawing his dao to check them.

Clean. Uncle's work.

Uncle had helped him clean his blades the first time, too. Water and oil and a shoulder to lean against until the shaking stopped, when the fire of battle finally guttered out and a scared fourteen-year-old remembered exactly how close some of the blades had come.

Stupid. I should have listened to Uncle.

But he'd been fourteen and full of himself and *angry* - and he'd just wanted to get away from the ship. From the quest, the stupid, useless quest, no one had seen the Avatar in a *hundred years* and he just couldn't *take* it anymore-!

I just wanted to go home.

But he couldn't. All he could do was leave the ship and leave the armor, just dress in quiet black and leave the Fire Nation behind.

He'd taken the dao, though. He wasn't *that* stupid. Firebend, and he might as well fly a banner saying *idiot prince here*. And the point was to be *alone*.

A port's back streets were no place to be alone.

He couldn't remember everything that had happened. Uncle said that was common, in your first real fight. He'd just felt something wasn't right-

I should have paid attention.

Heard the coarse laughs, smelled cheap wine, felt the ropes-

They thought I was a kid. Ten, maybe twelve. He'd put on height since then, but it still looked like he'd never be a match for his father... and why in the *world* had the spirits made men in other nations so damn *big*?

They thought I was a kid. Spirits, that's sick.

One-Hook Bai; that'd been the name he'd heard, in the midst of the roaring and the stink and the painful twist of his left wrist as he misjudged a blow and it skidded off ribs. He'd dealt with a thousand petty palace intrigues before his exile, he *knew* to remember names-

-And then he'd had just enough brains left to say screw pride, and start setting bastards on fire.

When it was over, some had run, two were melting in pools of flame....

And one was rattling out his life on top of a shaking teenager, blood bubbling black in the starlight from a half-cut throat.

Never wanted to do that. Never.

But he had, and he couldn't undo it. Like stepping off a cliff. Bending his first flame. He'd closed a door he'd never even realized was open, and locked himself on the other side.

Uncle had found him back on the ship, cleaning up. An unfamiliar, grim-faced Uncle, jaw set and hands hard as he looked over scrapes, bruises, and one knife-gash to the cheek Zuko couldn't even remember getting. Iroh had helped him clean up, taken his stumbling report - then hugged him within an inch of his life. And stayed with him, all that awful, numb day, and through the first night of nightmares.

Then yelled at him, once the retired general was certain his nephew was back in touch with reality.

Worked, Zuko thought wryly. *I never did anything that stupid again.*

Not just because of Uncle. Because... he'd asked, and listened, and found out about Bai's - preferences. And anybody who would turn over *anyone* to that was just *sick*-

But killing was awful and horrible and he *hated* it. And being *good* at it didn't change that.

There wasn't another way. Not this time.

Didn't help. Not today. Tomorrow, maybe.

Just keep going. Uncle needs you.

Iroh didn't have nightmares; not that he knew of, anyway. But he did get... sad. And clung even more tightly to his tea than usual.

Dyes and spices. Maybe Heng Mu has some ginseng? I could ask. I think. It couldn't hurt-

Footsteps. Heavy, and not trying to be quiet. Zuko faded into the shadows by Asahi.

"Hard to believe Cut-Horse Meng got taken out by an old refugee."

Two Earth Kingdom guards. Looked a lot more polished than the bullies he'd run into in Li's village. Good sign, in that they were probably professional enough to actually guard the town instead of terrorize it. Bad, in that if they saw him, they might know what they were looking at.

Stay hidden.

"He picked the wrong refugee." A third guard near the door, with some kind of insignia on the brim of his uniform hat. Probably the leader, by his stance. "I saw him talking to the Mu family last night. He may act harmless, but if that man wasn't a soldier a few decades back, I'm an airbender."

"Always thought your head was up in the clouds, Sergeant."

"Funny, Bao. Very funny." The sergeant watched his men saddle up their ostrich-horses and nodded as they checked their gear. "Stay sharp. Word has it Red Ling didn't like Meng either, but he won't take losing two of his gang well. Especially to a boy...." The sergeant stepped over to Asahi's stall. "Odd. I could have sworn the innkeeper said they were both here."

Asahi snapped at him.

"Better count your fingers," the other guard said dryly. "That's a Yonaguni hen."

"Yonaguni?" The sergeant frowned, absently checking. "Sounds almost Fire Nation."

"Probably did come from the occupied territories," his subordinate shrugged, leading his mount to the stable doors. "Give me a good, solid Feng any day. Just look at her! Too small for a *real* man, and that temper... they may be tough as steel, but it's just not worth it."

"Hmm." Still frowning, the sergeant followed them all out.

Zuko waited a moment, then patted Asahi on the neck. "Idiots. Don't listen to them." *We need to get out of here.*

Thinking of what they needed to get on the road, he ticked off tasks in his head. Asahi fed and tended, supplies packed, Uncle breakfasted....

Okay. There ought to be time for one more small errand. Assuming Heng Mu didn't just slam the door in his face.

"Where has that boy gone?" Iroh muttered under his breath, holding Asahi's reins in the early morning. It wasn't like Zuko to disappear....

Well. That wasn't *quite* accurate, given some of his nephew's... adventures. But it was certainly not like Zuko to hurry them both into readiness to travel, *then* disappear.

A few more minutes, and I had best start asking questions.

No; there was his nephew, at last. Looking a bit stunned, which was never a good sign. Carrying a tied bundle, and walking with... Heng Mu? Well, well. "How are you faring, Master Mu?"

"Better than yesterday," the merchant admitted, still moving stiffly. "Moving on?"

"It seems wise," Iroh said graciously.

"Be careful," Heng said seriously. "Sergeant Ying said those four we ran into were part of a larger gang. I don't know what the kingdom's coming to; there's never been bandits on these roads before."

"Lee told me," Iroh nodded. "We will be wary."

"That's good." Heng winked at his nephew's bundle. "Don't want you to have to use that all in one place."

Iroh raised a curious brow.

"Dyes, spices - and medicines, though that's more Nuan's specialty than mine," Heng said, smiling. "It's not much, but I hope it'll help keep you on your feet until Lee can find a teacher."

Ah. No wonder his nephew was in shock. "You are very kind," Iroh bowed.

"Thanks," Zuko got out, still dazed with disbelief.

"You two make my head hurt," Heng said honestly. "But I hope you find what you're looking for." He brightened. "And maybe the war will be over soon. They say the Avatar has returned!"

...*And the morning was going so well*, Iroh lamented.

"So I've heard," Zuko ground out.

Heng took a step back. "I don't understand. It's good news. The best we've had in a century. Why...?" One hand waved, helpless.

Why, indeed. Iroh racked his brain, trying to come up with *something*.

"The Avatar's supposed to keep a balance between the four nations," Zuko said, low and cold and angry. "Airbenders in the Nomads. Firebenders in the Fire Nation. Earthbenders in the Earth Kingdom. Waterbenders in the *Water Tribes*." The searing gaze swept them both. "What happens when someone's born who doesn't *fit*?"

Heng started to speak, and stopped. Shook his head, green eyes wide. "I don't know."

"An interesting argument, nephew," Iroh said quietly a few minutes later, as they made their way out of town. "I must admit, I did not think you would be interested in adding to our story." And he'd sounded perfectly sincere when he said it. Which was odd. Zuko was a *horrible* liar.

"I was thinking about the airbenders." Zuko kept his gaze straight ahead, flicking a glance toward the little travelers' shrine some way down the road. "If someone like that was born into the Fire Nation...."

"Yes?" Iroh asked cautiously.

"What would we *do*, Uncle? They'd be *our* people. Fire Nation. I don't care what the spirits say!" Fists clenched, but there was no trace of flames. "What kind of balance would take people away from their homes? From the people they care about?"

"You do not know the Avatar would do any such thing, nephew," Iroh said firmly.

"Do you know he *wouldn't*? Does *anybody* know?" Zuko's eyes narrowed. "The Avatar keeps the

four elements *balanced*. The Avatar keeps the four nations *separate*. People whose grandparents were Earth Kingdom are *in* the Fire Nation now! What happens to them, Uncle? What happens to my people, if the Avatar returns?"

"...I do not know," Iroh admitted at last. "I am glad you spoke of this, nephew. I will think on the question." He frowned, troubled. "I will think on it, very carefully." He nodded toward the shrine off the side of the road, little statues under a rough-hewn alcove of rock to keep rain off inked strips of paper. "Perhaps a few moments to pray?"

Zuko's jaw tightened, and Iroh braced for the explosion-

"Why not."

Er, what?

Iroh kept his smile mild and thoughtful as he made bows to those honored in the shrine, no matter how startled he felt. To draw attention to his nephew's behavior would be to force Zuko to justify it. And if it did not fit the mold of a loyal exile bent on capturing the Avatar - well. His nephew's reaction would not be helpful.

For every step forward, a step back, it seems, Iroh thought ruefully. He does not try to be contrary, I think. Only stubborn. Push, and he pushes back. Pull, and he fights to escape-

There, tucked into a crevice in the rock. A rough circle of blue stone, carved so its shadows suggested yin and yang.

Tui and La. Moon and Ocean. Push and Pull.

Do you remember us, Yue? We tried to help, and we failed - and perhaps we have no right to ask your aid now. But you of all spirits should remember what it is to be human, and to love your people.

I can fight Zuko's love for his father. I will fight it. He is fighting it, though he does not yet know he does. Every moment he leaves his quest to help another, every time he struggles to think instead of chase after his honor - he is fighting, Yue. He is fighting so hard.

I can fight Ozai's hold. But how can I fight his love for his people? We are what we are; the royal blood of the Fire Nation. As you were, of the Northern Water Tribe. Those within our nation's borders are in our care, no matter what element they were born to.

My nephew has been betrayed too deeply, and too well. He cannot trust the Avatar will be merciful. And I know too much of spirits to believe all will be well. Zuko may be right. The Fire Nation has taken so much from the world. The balance may require that we give it back. Even if it breaks our hearts.

But if there is any way... if there is any way... help us, Yue. Help us see a way to help our people.

Help us, or I go no further. I will not betray my nephew for the Avatar.

Not the most reverent end to a prayer, perhaps. But there came a time when a man simply had to say, *enough*.

He had lost his father, his wife, his son. He had lost brother and niece as well, though they yet lived. If the spirits' balance required Zuko as well - no. *No*. Not while he yet breathed. Not while one scrap of his soul even existed-

Rough stone glimmered with blue.

So. Iroh sighed, straightening. *I have been heard. What the answer may be, though-* He blinked, and looked again. "Prince Zuko!"

"It's information, Uncle." Zuko's face was set, as he tucked the prayer-slip he'd been reading back into place. "We can't ask too many questions without risking our disguise. There are bandits around here. I want to know what else people have met on this road. Or think they might." Zuko brushed off his hands. "If they wanted the prayers to be private, they would have burned them."

In the Fire Nation that would have been true, yes, but - ah, never mind. "What did you find?"

"No plagues. A few rock-falls; we should keep an eye on overhangs. And somebody has a vicious sense of humor." Zuko glanced at a slip near the last he'd put back.

Brows up and interested, Iroh dipped his head to read. Hmm, some kind of malediction on Red Ling, a plea to set two evils against each other....

Reading the last lines, he took a deliberate step back, and turned away. "We should go."

Perhaps they could move fast enough. Perhaps they did not fit the spirits' requirements. Good as they both were, they were hardly a long-range Fire Nation raiding party-

And three hours down the road, he knew it didn't matter.

"I hear you killed two of my men...."

By the time Sergeant Ying and his men got to the ambush site, the bodies had almost stopped smoldering.

"Spirits," someone muttered. "Fire Nation? Here?"

"Look for a trail," the sergeant ordered. *Oma and Shu, so many dead.* "That many firebenders should have left tracks."

The men looked dubious, and who could blame them? But they split off, two pairs of two, leading their mounts as they looked for the characteristic scuffs of armored feet.

Sergeant Ying stayed behind with old Gui, watching the elderly veteran walk among the bodies. And cursed the war. Gui ought to be carving wooden necklace chains for grandchildren, not keeping up with the young men and wounded veterans who made up most of the home guard. "Let's not take more time than we need," Ying said aloud. "I hear raiding parties don't stick around after a slaughter like this, but I don't want to risk our being outnumbered...." A scrap of cloth caught his eye, seared and crumbling, but one edge still blatantly scarlet.

A red bandanna. A group of armed men, their weapons now twisted metal. *Mismatched* arms; this was no army patrol.

"Red Ling's gang," Gui said with grim satisfaction. Nodded toward one of the blackened skulls. "I recognize the teeth on that one."

The teeth of a man who'd tried to take advantage of Gui's widowed daughter, before the veteran had driven him off with a sword and a bluff. Gui had wasted no time afterward, either, bringing the

shattered family into town to work in the inn, before joining up with the guard himself. Bringing decades of experience... and a grudge. Ying could put up with the one, for the sake of the other.

Red Ling's men. Well. That was one piece of good luck for the day, then.

A drift of wind blew corpse smoke over them, and Sergeant Ying fought to breathe. "I've never have you seen anything like this before?"

"I have," Gui said gravely. "At the siege of Ba Sing Se." He stepped back from the bodies, and motioned Ying to join him. "I think they were standing... here."

Ying moved there, and frowned. "That doesn't make sense. Why come so close?" Red Ling's body was barely ten yards away. Why come within range of firebenders when he had archers among his men?

"Do I look like a fortune-teller?" Gui *hmped*. "The scorch marks make a pattern. Put that together with the bodies, and those," he waved a hand, indicating Red Ling and a sweep of five men about him, "went down in one blow."

"One blow?"

"Hmm. A mass fireball, it looks like. Not something most common firebenders learn."

"*One* blow?" the sergeant repeated, incredulous. Six men dead, in one fireblast?

"They're grouped together, Sergeant. Which means they had no chance to run. Yes, I think so." Gui shaded his eyes, looking up at surrounding cliff walls. "Ah. There are the archers." A snort. "I should say, *were*."

Seared wood, scattered in pieces down the slopes. Each bow had been seared through as if cut by a flaming knife. Ying measured the distance with his eyes, and swore.

A firebender's fire died, the further it got from him, the Army always said. Get far enough away, and you'd be safe.

"That's over a hundred feet! *No* firebender can do that-"

"No common soldier, no," Gui said dryly. Frowned, old eyes sweeping the scene. "Only imperial firebenders are that precise."

For a moment, Sergeant Ying devoutly hoped rumor was right, and Fire Nation raiders did strike and move on. Because he desperately wanted men capable of doing *this* to be anywhere but here.

"One blast while they still had surprise," Gui said thoughtfully. "Archers next. And then... hmm. They separated, to take out the stragglers; there, and there." He shook his head. "It was probably over before most of them knew they were dead."

Chilling thought. As was what he wasn't finding on the ground. "Why aren't there tracks?" Ying demanded. "If a troop went through here, they should have left some sign."

"Oh, this wasn't a troop," Gui shrugged.

The sergeant eyed him, taken aback. "More? Spirits, if we're outnumbered, *warn* a man!"

"No, not more." Gui smiled darkly. "Four, I'd guess."

"Four?" Ying sputtered. "*Four* firebenders did this?"

"Or less," Gui agreed. "Feel any better?"

"No," Sergeant Ying gritted out. Raised an eyebrow, as his scouts came wandering back. "What did you find?"

"Nothing, sir," Chen, the oldest of the four said uneasily. "No boot prints, no komodo-rhino tracks, no scorch marks where somebody blew off steam. It's like they just... disappeared."

Like spirits, Ying could hear in the silence.

Well. If no one else was going to say it, he certainly wasn't. "Let's get back," he said frankly. "We've got a report to make."

A/N: On why I decided Zuko has experience in lethal self-defense.... First, "The Blue Spirit". Even vastly outnumbered, Zuko never hesitates. Second... one thing that's struck me about the series is that compared to several firebenders (hi there Zhao, *Aang*), Zuko is careful with his fire. Hell on meditation candles, yes, but he doesn't set things on fire by accident. Even when he fights Katara as the last thing in his way at the Spirit Oasis, he does not burn her. In fact, if you look at the havoc the Gaang has caused throughout the series, Zuko's a *lot* more careful than a lot of benders. ("The Earth King." Whoof.)

And in real life, "careful" is what you see from martial artists who know they can *really hurt someone*.

Given Zuko often needs to be hit over the head with the obvious, and was exiled outside the Fire Nation (to areas where, surprise! People don't *like* firebenders), the odds of him having gotten into a deadly fight are depressingly high.

Top that off with his uncle being *General Iroh*, whom the Avatar creators avow was "very good at what he did". Zuko is a crown prince of the Fire Nation, *specifically* trained to rule and conquer more of the world. He may hate killing. He may go to great lengths to avoid it. But he's definitely been trained that it is an *acceptable option*.

He's not Aang.

Reverence for life is fine, upstanding, and idealistic. But when all's said and done, count which nations are still standing.

(Though, Gyatso? *Wow.*)

Chapter End Notes

Notes by me: Soo, this was a very long delay. Sorry for that, I couldn't get access to my computer for a few days. I hope I will be able to post regularly from now on.

Something else: *Read Vatharas notes!!* They give a lot of insight how the story developed, and is also very interesting. Have fun. Oh and also, the usual disclaimer, which I won't write down in every single chapter, since it applies to the whole story.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Like usual

PS: If it isn't clear, the A/N notes which you find usually at the end of the chapter are Vatharas. I just include them as notes.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Baths are good, Zuko thought wearily, sneaking from the tavern's bathhouse in through the kitchen's back door, silently dancing through the blind spots of the preoccupied cook at the stove and her harried sons as they scurried in and out with food and dishes. Uncle might have found a fellow Pai Sho enthusiast in the bartender, but Zuko still preferred not to use the front door. No sense asking for attention.

No sense at all, given the bartender apparently wasn't just a bartender.

Order of the White Lotus. What on earth is that? And Uncle's a Grand Master? What the hell's going on?

Out of the kitchen, through the common room's shadows, and up the stairs. They actually had a room, for once, even if it wasn't much more than a glorified closet with a cot and a window. And how Uncle had pulled that off, he really didn't want to know.

He should want to know. He should be down there kicking in the bartender's door, or at least leaning on it, listening in to Uncle's conversation.

But he was tired. And sick, in a way fire couldn't heal.

Door closed behind him, Zuko curled up near the window, breathing in spring's night air. Baths *were* good. Clean hair. Clean skin. Clean clothes - though half of them were borrowed, and he was wearing a too-familiar embroidered robe over them all to hold in as much of the bath's heat as he could manage.

Too bad a bath couldn't do anything for his *mind*.

No witnesses.

Eleven bandits, snuffed out like candle flames.

Candles I could light again.

Tactically, he knew Uncle was right. There had been too many to take them with just bare hands and steel. And once they started bending....

Once they started, they couldn't leave anyone alive.

If we're discovered, we're dead.

And they hadn't been good people. To put it mildly. He still felt sick.

I don't want to die. I don't want Uncle to die. Zuko dug fingers into his scalp, nails biting even through hair. So get a grip and deal with it already!

It didn't feel right. *Nothing* felt right.

Letting go, he stared at his fingertips, and wondered when his own hands had betrayed him.

Still strong, despite everything they'd been through. Still callused with years of stubborn blade-work and firebending katas. But other marks were starting to appear. Red-rubbed skin, where Asahi's reins tugged against him. Nails rough-trimmed almost to the quick, after hunger had left them prone to tearing. Thin white scars on the back of his left hand; he thought they were from that ill-fated attempt to drag the Avatar through the blizzard. But he wasn't sure.

It scared him, that he wasn't sure.

You had him, Zuzu, Azula's voice crooned in his mind. You had him, and you were just too weak to hold him.

At the fortress. At the North Pole. In the desert-

No, Zuko told himself, remembering fear and panic and rage as charred flesh knit back together under his fingers. *Not that time.*

Three master benders and an idiot with a boomerang against him. On his side, an injured man. And the sure knowledge of a returning enemy.

Loyalty to the Fire Lord-

Did *not* require suicide. It never had. Soldiers might choose to fight to the death; he'd heard what other nations did to captured firebenders, and it was the stuff of nightmares. But loyalty meant *living* for your lord, not dying for him. He was alive, and Uncle was alive, and they'd have another chance. Just as Iroh's soldiers had, after he'd broken the siege of Ba Sing Se.

He wasn't a traitor, Azula. He wasn't a coward. Did you read the casualty reports? It wasn't just Lu Ten. Those earthbenders made the terrain inside the wall a deathtrap. We can't afford losses like that. Not if we want to hold the rest of our territory in any kind of good order.

If we take land, it's ours. If people live there under our laws, they're our people. If we can't give them something better than the war, what's the point?

But it was the Fire Lord's war.

It's - it's not my problem. I have my orders. Capture the Avatar. Alive.

Azula said their father didn't care anymore-

Azula always lies!

Breathe. Fold fingers into fists. Unclench them. The Avatar was gone, and Uncle was alive, and he was *not* a traitor. He just - had to think. About what to do next.

Scars and wear and callus, and the weird tickling of hair against his ears. Why couldn't he *think*?

Someone knocked on the door, brisk but quiet. "Hello?" A fumbling at the latch. "I'm looking for Lee? Your uncle said you could help."

Act normal, Zuko told himself, standing to reach the door.

...Would help if I had any idea what normal is.

He braced himself and opened the door. "I'm Lee," he managed. "What's the-"

Green. A kind of nice, darker forest green, bordered by pale yellow like a shaft of sun through shadows. Only if the frogs closing her dress were *there*, then the soft roundness he was looking at was-

Flushing, Zuko jerked his eyes up to meet a blue gaze. "Where are you *from*, Kyoshi Island?"

Almost a head taller and at least a few years older, she looked down and back, her own jaw dropping as expressions flitted across her face. Annoyance, surprise, sudden shock....

Zuko stared right back, fingers curling. *Don't you. Dare. Pity me.* "What's the problem?" he said roughly. "Is someone hurt?"

"I'm Xiu," she said, eyes narrowed slightly in consideration. "My Grandma has an awful headache. Your uncle said you'd help." She backed up a step, and crossed her arms. "He didn't say you were raised by raven-wolves."

"I *was not!*"

"And you're half right. Dad was from Kyoshi Island. Left to join the military over here; no way was *he* wearing a dress. He just never went back."

Zuko blinked, struck by the memory of a Southern Tribe wolf-tail above red and white makeup. It'd been pretty funny, afterward. Once he'd gotten over being slammed into the wall by the Avatar's fans. "Why are you telling me this?"

"You remind me of my cousin, Yingpei," Xiu said ruefully. "He's lousy with people, too. And when he's surprised - well. It's not pretty." She tilted her head. "Coming?"

This was so many different kinds of wrong, it made his head hurt. *Just get through it.* "I need to get our teapot-"

"We've got hot water downstairs." She gave him a hint of a smile. "That's what your uncle said you like to work with, right?"

"Y-yeah." The floor was solid. He could feel it under his feet. Why did he have the same kind of knot in his gut as when the ship was about to fall into the trough of a rogue wave?

Just keep moving.

No candles lit the room the old woman rested in, though a basin of water sat on a warming pan of coals near a worn towel. She looked up when they opened the door, brown eyes slitted. "So you're a healer, young man?"

Just inside the doorway, Zuko froze.

I'm not a healer. I'm a firebender.

I'm not Earth Kingdom. I'm not a waterbender. If Uncle didn't need this for our disguise....

I'm your enemy! Can't you see that? You don't want me here!

"He's not real great at talking, Grandma." Xiu shut the door, forcing him forward. "Go on, it's all right."

No. It wasn't. But-

Do what you have to.

Grimly, Zuko picked up worn cloth, and reached for hot water.

I think he thinks Grandma is going to eat him, Xiu thought wryly. Not quite like Yingpei, then. Her cousin didn't usually know someone had ill intent until they stole his lunch out from under him. Lee seemed perfectly aware that Grandma was best handled with kid gloves, or possibly iron pincers. She was proud enough of her status as a fine silk weaver at the best of times; headaches made her downright *cranky*.

Leaning against the wall by the door, the younger weaver watched Lee work with interest. Outside of ports that the Water Tribes visited, how often did anyone get to see a bending healer?

No one told me there were pretty colors.

Flickers of gold and green and violet, shimmering through cotton as Lee moved the steaming towel over Grandma's forehead. Like stories her father had told of the southern lights, dancing in Kyoshi Island's winter skies.

How did he know where Dad was from? Xiu wondered. *Kyoshi's been neutral since the war started. Most people have never met an Islander.*

A puzzle. And not the only one. Lee - well, from his height, she'd have guessed he was fourteen, tops.

Then again, maybe short just runs in the family. His uncle's pretty... compact.

Must be. Lee certainly didn't act fourteen, and once you looked past the scar, he didn't look fourteen either.

Once you looked past the scar....

I'm an idiot. Burn scar - looks years old - and he's with his uncle? No parents?

War orphan. Had to be. Spirits, no wonder Lee was jumpy.

And no wonder he didn't know what to do with his eyes, either. If he was the late teens his voice gave away, he would have been burned just about the time he'd started figuring out girls just might like to go on walks in the moonlight. Ouch.

Still. Some things about Lee just didn't fit.

That robe, for one.

Pine-dark, embroidered with old-fashioned fire-thorns in ruby-rust on every hem and seam. Not the expensive, flashy materials someone would use trying to impress; she was a master weaver, she knew what was in style. No; that was old-fashioned wild silk thread, spun from broken oak-cedar moth cocoons and dyed with cochineal-dew roasted with sea salt.

Earth and Air, Water and Fire. Someone was serious.

Mushi wearing a protective scarf was one thing; he was old as Grandma, probably, the kind of person who adhered to traditions because they suited him. *Both* of them? Either respect for the spirits ran in the family-

Somehow, that just doesn't seem to fit Lee.

-Or they'd run into the same kind of trouble as the villagers near Hei Bai, after the Fire Nation burned the forest down. Angry spirits, who didn't *care* if the people they hurt were innocent. Which was... scary.

Kind of makes sense for him to be panicked, though. Great-Gran used to say, benders touch the spirit world to get their power. And it can touch them back.

Even that didn't sit right. There was just *something* about Lee that-

Pale hands shifted as he plunged cloth back into steaming water, and Xiu swallowed.

"What?" Lee asked roughly, glancing her way.

"I thought the dao were your uncle's," Xiu said honestly. She hadn't had much chance to look inside their room, but it wasn't much of a room. "They're yours, aren't they?"

Lee looked down at callused hands, and something shut down in his face. "The roads aren't safe."

Which was no answer at all, and more than she wanted to know.

I've seen Dad look like that, after....

After he had to kill somebody.

Cool and calm, Xiu. Remember what Dad always says. Be like a mountain lake. If you're right - Lee's already jumpy. Don't make anything worse.

"No wonder you're such a confused young man," Grandma said sternly, squinting to test the absence of pain as Lee put the towel down. "A healer, learning steel? What is the world coming to?"

The door creaked slightly. "And why should one not?" Mushi said genially. "The waterbenders of the North Pole are some of the fiercest fighters anywhere. I have heard they recently turned back an assault by the Fire Navy."

"I heard they had help," Lee said darkly.

"Hmm. A giant spirit-monster rampaging through the fleet," Mushi's hand made a sort of swimming motion, "would count, yes."

"Spirit-monster?" Grandma said skeptically. "Nonsense. The spirits haven't bothered with our world in over a century. They've abandoned us." She scowled. "Just like the Avatar."

"...He didn't abandon you."

"Lee," Mushi said quietly.

"It's *wrong*, Uncle! The Avatar has to save us. The Avatar abandoned us. The Avatar's returned,

and he's going to fix *everything*. 'That's all I hear, everywhere we go. And it's crazy! The Avatar is *twelve years old!*'"

He's... what? Xiu thought, stunned.

"The Avatar is a child! An idiotic, naïve, hyperactive little *airbender* who thinks *everybody* deserves to live! And people think he's going to save them? How? Ask the Fire Lord to think really, *really* hard about the war and decide to play *nice*?" Knuckles were bone-white in clenched fists. "You want somebody to *save you* from the Fire Nation? Grow up and do it yourselves!"

The door slamming was almost an afterthought.

Mushi blinked at the space where his nephew had been, and sighed. "I must apologize-"

"Indeed you must!" Grandma snapped, eyes glinting. "You're training *that boy* as a healer? He may be a bender, but he'll never do!"

"I'd go to him," Xiu cut in, before her grandma could really get going. Respect for your elders was honorable and right, but it was also the reason Dad had left Kyoshi Island in the first place. *And* the reason she'd been stuck with Grandma on the trip back home, when Mom had decided to stay to help nurse Aunt Wen through the latest bout of fever. *Thanks, Mom. You owe me. Big-time.* "I like to hear the truth. Even if he is as blunt as a dropped ax." She stood straight, and gave Mushi a sober look. "It is true, isn't it?"

Mushi hesitated. "I might leave out *idiotic....*"

"Oh, boy," Xiu said faintly.

"My nephew spoke nothing but the truth," Mushi agreed soberly. "We have encountered the Avatar on our travels, and while he is a master airbender, he has no wish to take a life. If people are hoping for a great warrior to stop the Fire Nation's advance, they are mistaken." He bowed to Grandma. "If you will excuse me...."

"Good riddance," Grandma sniffed.

Xiu sighed, already considering what she'd have to do to clean up, given Grandma's fading eyesight. Towel, water, coin purse - oh no. "Grandma! Did you pay him?"

Grandma straightened, obviously feeling well enough to act her stature. "We are *silk weavers*, Xiu. If a rag-tag tramp of a water-blooded peasant doesn't have enough sense to hold his tongue when- What are you doing?"

It's dark in here. She probably didn't even see the scar. Much less... ooo, respect be damned! "He was *bending*, Grandma. He's *hungry*." Snatching clinking strings from the purse, she dashed out.

Light was flickering under their door; they must have had the window open, though Xiu couldn't feel any draft. She couldn't make out what they were saying, either, but she didn't have to. Older sane relative trying to talk sense into a sullen teen was easy to pick out. She knocked. "Lee? You forgot something."

The door inched open, and Lee swallowed. "I'm - sorry?"

"Don't worry about it," Xiu said bluntly. "Grandma can't stand Yingpei, either." She looked at him askance. "I know your uncle's already given you an earful on this, but listen. If you're good, and I'm betting you are going to be good, you're going to have to deal with a lot of people like

Grandma. This isn't like the border towns, or whatever little port you came from. This is the heart of the Earth Kingdom. I hate to say it, but a lot of our nobles and artisans think acting like that is a good reason to cheat you." She pressed the coins into his hands. "Don't let them."

He stared at her as if she were as weird as the Earth King's bear. "But... why?"

"Dad was from Kyoshi Island, remember?" Xiu smiled wryly. "I've seen it all before. He always said, noble blood might be a gift from the spirits, but noble behavior is a gift you give your family. And yourself." She backed up a step, and grinned. "Besides, you kind of did me a favor. Grandma's going to be so mad about *you*, all 'improper behavior' and 'what is this world coming to', she's not going to even *think* about pestering me to 'stop pining after that no-good soldier boy and settle down with a nice rich young man'. As if. Rich men's wives don't get to weave the way I do." She winked at him.

"Um... you're welcome?"

"*Xiu!*" rang down the hall.

"Good luck, Lee!" Still grinning, she dashed off.

One nag-free night, coming up. Yay!

"I must give my compliments to Master Xueyou's wife," Iroh said, leaning back on his cot as he rubbed a bit of candle-wax between his fingers. "That was delicious!"

"You can probably tell her in the morning. If you catch her early enough." Zuko's eyes were closed, but he lay tense on the futon below, obviously awake despite the darkness.

"Early?" Iroh arched an eyebrow. Firebenders rose with the sun, true, but given the chance, most people slept later.

"Bread with dinner. Made this morning. She's probably up hours before dawn."

"Ah, yes." Iroh smiled. "I forget, sometimes, how often you found the ship's ghost watch convenient, to be... unobserved."

"Not as easy as you'd think," Zuko said quietly. "Bakers, millers, brewers... smiths, sometimes... all kinds of people get up in the dark." He shifted on the futon. "Where are we going?"

"Full Moon Bay, eventually," Iroh answered, allowing the conversation to shift. One of these days he would pin Zuko down about the Blue Spirit. But not tonight. "We will make a stop shortly beforehand, to pick up some... documentation."

"False documents."

"But very good forgeries, I am assured," Iroh said cheerfully. "From there, we should be able to reach Ba Sing Se unhindered. The city is vast, and full of refugees. We should pass unnoticed."

"You mean hide." But it wasn't accusing. Just... tired.

"Yes," Iroh acknowledged. "We are tired, nephew. We need rest, and time to breathe, before we plan our next move." *And I intend to stretch that time as long as possible.*

"We have a *bounty* on our heads, Uncle! Hiding's no good if someone *knows where you are!*"

But no one would- oh. He had not explained, had he? "Master Xueyou does not know who we are," Iroh said firmly. "He recognized the moves, and certain words. But the only *name* he knows, is Mushi."

Zuko's hand lifted, hesitated near his face. "I'm not exactly easy to miss, Uncle. If Azula finds this place-"

"Then it is well that Xueyou knows my nephew is a waterbender, is it not?" Iroh said pleasantly.

"...You set up that thing with Xiu's Grandma on *purpose*."

"It was convenient," the retired general allowed. "Two leaves in the forest, nephew. I rely on your courage, and determination."

"You do?"

Spirits, the *surprise* in his nephew's voice. And - was that a hint of hope? *Toph was right. I do need to tell him I need him.* "I have always relied on you to do what you believed was right, nephew."

Gold eyes glanced at him, then away. "Why did she do that?"

"Because Xiu has her own honor," Iroh said plainly. "Get some rest, nephew. If we move too slowly in the morning, I fear we are destined to meet that most unpleasant woman again. And some destinies are best avoided."

With a snort of laughter, Zuko pulled the covers over his head.

Smiling himself, Iroh turned the bit of wax over again, recalling Zuko's stricken look as the candle flared in the wake of their argument. *I know I can rely on you, nephew. But I think, wherever we hide, we will need shutters.*

Small enough price to pay, for that glimmer of hope on Zuko's face.

That was the boy I knew, years ago. The one I thought I had lost with Lady Ursa.

How very odd, that speaking of the Avatar should bring it so close to the surface....

No. Not the Avatar. That Aang is a child, expected to do the impossible.

Only for the Avatar it was possible. Or so legends said. Even the boy himself seemed to think so.

Still. Why should that strike home with his nephew, who truly *did* have an impossible task...?

Oh, spirits.

His Zuko. His dear, shy nephew, who worked so hard and loved them all so fiercely, years ago. Who failed so often, but struggled onward, because he had *hope*.

He never believed it was impossible.

Iroh let out a quiet breath, resisting the urge to pound his head against the wall. Zuko needed his sleep.

Yet another true proverb: there is no fool like an old fool.

All this time - all this time! - he had thought Zuko's quest driven by pure, stubborn determination.

A burning need to take the cruel fate, the *punishment*, that had been unjustly laid on him, and force it down Ozai's throat.

I was wrong. It was never about rage.

Not rage as most knew it, at least. Not the bitter anger driven by hate. No; this was a brighter, purer flame, and all the more desperate for it.

He loves his father. And so the task must not be impossible.

And if he fails, again and again... it is not because it cannot be done. It is because he is as Ozai has always told him he is. A disappointment. A failure. No true son of the Fire Lord.

Not a punishment; not to his nephew. A gift. A poisonous, terrible gift, that Zuko had taken to his heart. For it was a gift from his father, and what else could he do?

Spirits. What do I do?

Sleep, Iroh decided sternly. You were wrong. Know you were wrong. What you told Zuko is still true: you are both tired. Rest, and see if a better answer presents itself.

And hope the spirits have no more bandits between here and Ba Sing Se.

"You're twitching," Zuko said dryly, leading Asahi down the dusty road.

Uncle Iroh blinked at him, almost innocent. "Oh? And why would two innocent traveling healers need to be alarmed, Lee?"

Right. Like he needed any extra reminders to watch his tongue, out here where anyone might be listening. Every once in a while they passed other travelers; sometimes a few weary stragglers, sometimes whole caravans.

For a hidden bay the Fire Nation's not supposed to know about, this place is awfully popular.

"You're twitching," Zuko repeated, letting his gaze flick over road, rocks, trees. "Just wait. Whatever it is, it'll get us later. When you're not expecting it."

"It has been remarkably quiet these past few days," Uncle grumbled.

"Like I said. Wait."

It *had* been quiet. Quiet enough, long enough, that all his screaming nerves had pretty much screamed themselves out, and were now quivering in exhausted knots while Zuko held his breath in anticipation of the next disaster.

At least I've got the teapot bluff down.

He'd had one or two false starts in the past few days, complete with nervous looks at the little firepot that seemed to flare contrary to breezes or fuel. But he'd persisted, and slowly, things seemed to fall into place. Using hot water was still hard... but it was a good hard, like a tough practice, or climbing down rough cliffs. He could handle it. Unlike Uncle, who was all but tearing gray hair out trying to get candle flames to flux into the healing fire, those few times they could practice unobserved.

He'll get it. We just need some time.

They'd have time, if Uncle was right about Ba Sing Se. And yet....

It's too easy.

Someplace they could hide. Someplace they'd be *safe*. Someplace no one from the Fire Nation had ever, supposedly, been able to invade - so obviously, anyone who made it inside *couldn't* be Fire Nation, and no one would suspect them.

Perfect. Too perfect.

It's a trap.

He didn't know how. Not yet. But he hadn't survived thirteen years in the palace and more than three scouring the world without listening to his instincts. They might be flawed and tattered and singing tension down his nerves whenever a stray lizard-bird twitched wrong, but they'd kept him alive.

Perfect and pretty equaled poison. White jade. Flutter-hornets. Azula.

But Uncle thinks it's safe.

No. Uncle *hoped* it was safe. He might have intelligence and reports and secret society contacts, but he'd never been there. And while Zuko knew his grasp of military strategy paled next to Azula's, he knew this: a good commander never, *ever* declared an area safe. Not until he'd ground-truthed it himself.

He's counting on me.

Okay. He could deal with that. Stay calm, stay back; let Uncle be the friendly face while he watched for the jaws of the trap. Then, depending on the situation, either tell Iroh what he'd found-

And hope he listens - no, he promised he would. He promised.

-Or, if everything had just dropped into Koh's lair in a hand-basket, grab Uncle and *run*.

Decision made, Zuko breathed a sigh of relief, murmuring endearments to Asahi when she turned her head to look at him. He had a plan. Not much of a plan, but given what usually happened to his plans....

Yu Yan archers. Typhoons. Ocean-spirits. Azula.

Given that, he'd just have to keep his eyes open and be ready to improvise.

Speaking of. "Someone thinks they're being sneaky," Zuko murmured, not looking where the brush was rustling.

"I see." Iroh smiled, gentle as a komodo-rhino about to take down an annoying little gate. "I believe we should allow him to think us fooled. For now."

Harmless travelers. Right. Damn.

Turning off the open road to reach the oddly tree-shaped rock Iroh's source had described, the retired general stopped, and cleared his throat. "Hello?"

"No names!" Shorter than Earth Kingdom average, and not at all skinny, the man who slunk out of the bushes still reminded Zuko of a weasel-mink. Without the pretty coat. "No names, I don't know you, you don't know me, I was never here- urk!"

Casually gripping the man's wrist, Zuko held him while Iroh checked the little documents their nameless contact had pressed into his hands. "They appear to be in order," Uncle said calmly.

"Of course they're in order! You don't think I'd risk my life - er, *your* lives - with bad papers, do you? You've got what you were promised! Let go!"

"Who are you afraid of?" Zuko asked darkly.

"Afraid? Me? Do I look afraid? Ha!" The man yanked against his grip, and blanched. "Son of a hog-monkey- er, I mean, you can let go anytime-"

"Who'd trace fake papers back to you?" Zuko said, voice low and dangerous. "Tell me!"

"N-no one! I swear!" He yanked harder, and yelped.

"You are, perhaps, unaware of the consequences of that particular hold, Master Nameless," Iroh observed thoughtfully. "Another such unwise move is likely to fracture your wrist. Which would do much damage to one of your more... lucrative sources of income."

Sweating, the forger gulped.

"Now. So that we may all avoid unpleasantness, and leave you to enrich yourself further - who is it, that you fear more than simple refugees longing for a better life?"

"The - the Dai Li," the forger stuttered. "They work for the Earth King. Or so people say. They don't leave Ba Sing Se, usually, but when they do... they're earthbenders. Cross them, and you just *disappear*. Or - worse."

"Worse?" Iroh asked levelly.

"I don't know. I don't know! People say - sometimes those they take, go *away* for a while. And when they come back, they're not *them* anymore. No one knows why. No one knows how! But it happens. And it's not going to happen to me!"

At Iroh's glance, Zuko let him go. "Thank you for the generous advice," Iroh said genially. "We wish you the best of fortune."

Straightening his robes, the forger sniffed. "You're going to need more than that. They don't let *animals* into Ba Sing Se. Not with refugees." With a last, irate glance toward Zuko, he scurried back down the road.

They don't.... Zuko swallowed hard, patting Asahi's neck when she bumped against him. "Uncle?"

Iroh sighed. "I have the name of a reputable caravan master, as well," he said plainly. "We should be able to find a representative of his near the ferries."

Oh.

Breathe. In and out. He hadn't been gutted by a sword blade. It just felt that way.

"I am sorry, nephew-"

"Let's go," Zuko said harshly, tugging on Asahi's reins. "We're wasting daylight."

He could make it to shore after he'd been blown out of his own ship. He could do this.

Besides, it wasn't like he'd had the right to expect anything else.

Silly Zuzu, Azula's voice crooned as he walked. *You know nothing you love is yours to keep.*

Chapter End Notes

A/N: We will see Asahi again, but it'll take several chapters.

And yes, the Star Wars reference in Chapter 6 was intentional. I couldn't resist.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

A/N: Nope, still don't own anything. Certainly not the dialogue from various episodes, as some of it pops up in here. (

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Never, in all my days, did I think I would be longing for a bandit attack, Iroh thought ruefully, leading their way aboard the ferry. Zuko was a silent shadow in his wake, face empty of everything but cold determination.

He'd seen that look before. Three years ago, after Zuko had read the terms of his banishment.

He did the right thing. He did the honorable thing. And again, all he has for it is loss. Iroh tried to keep his face pleasant, even as his heart ached. Zuko was forbidding enough for the both of them. *And this time, I am the one who has dealt the blow.*

Never mind that he had not laid a finger on his nephew. Wounds to the heart went far deeper than mere scars.

I wish he would yell at me. Spirits, I wish he would set something on fire.

Nothing. Only terse replies when he must, and silence whenever it was possible. Like a warrior with his death-wound, holding his peace so his comrades would not break and die.

There is nothing I can do, Iroh decided, heart heavy. *Not here. Not now.*

Well... nothing serious. But then, perhaps serious was not what his nephew needed.

Grinning to himself, Iroh plotted.

That, has to be the most ridiculous hat this side of the Western Sea, Zuko thought blankly. A lone, rough-edged thought, crashing through the numbness of where's the next attack and she's gone, *it's not fair, it's never fair.* He would have been just as happy if it crashed right back out again, and left him numb and bleeding.

But this was Uncle. Uncle doing something that *looked* completely, utterly insane. Which meant it was time to duck. Or at least start distracting like hell.

I am in no shape for this.

Didn't matter. He had to try. "Look around," Zuko managed roughly. "We're not tourists." Desperate to shut down the conversation, he raised the wooden bowl of supposed lunch to his lips-

Sniffed, fingers feeling the lukewarm heat from the brown liquid, and abruptly dumped the whole bowl over the side.

"Lee," Uncle sighed.

"I'm not spending the next week chained to a latrine," Zuko growled.

Uncle Iroh blinked then, and sniffed his own bowl. "I admit it is not pleasant...."

"It's - not the smell." Reluctantly, Zuko curled his fingers over the rim of Iroh's bowl, feeling the faint warmth above the liquid. "Something in it doesn't feel right."

With a thoughtful frown, Uncle tossed his own bowl over the railing.

"But - what-" Zuko managed.

"I have survived spoiled food before, during the war," Iroh said gravely. "Hunger is unpleasant, but not fatal. If something in the energy of that is amiss enough that you sensed it, I do not feel inclined to trust to luck."

"Huh," a low voice chuckled. "Knew the food was bad, but not that bad."

Zuko refused to flinch. He'd heard the trio of teenagers coming, but he'd hoped they'd just walk on by.

Like I'd be that lucky.

Armed teenagers. Joy. A thin, small one with red striping on pale cheeks, like a Kyoshi Warrior gone feral. A taller, silent boy with a bow. And in front, messy brown hair over sly brown eyes and a chewed stalk of dry grass....

Leader. With an attitude. Great. Just great.

"My name's Jet, and these are my freedom fighters, Smellerbee and Longshot."

Would-be guerillas. Even better. Meaning they probably knew what Fire Nation looked like. Or thought they did.

Let's hope they look for uniforms. Deliberately, Zuko looked over the lake.

"Hey," Smellerbee said.

Damn. Be polite. Keep the cover. "Hello," Zuko replied, not looking back.

"So... waterbender, huh?"

Calculating. Jet's voice was pure calculation, hidden under devilish charm. It raised all the hackles on Zuko's neck. "So?" he said coolly.

"Don't usually see that in the Earth Kingdom." Jet's voice was lazy and watchful. Waiting.

Damn it! They don't even think I'm a firebender, and we're already screwed-

"Yes, it was quite the surprise, when we discovered what was happening," Iroh stepped in smoothly. "We hear there are waterbenders in Ba Sing Se. With luck we will find one, so there will be no more... er, random mishaps."

"Did some damage, huh?" Jet smirked. "You sound like our kind of guy."

If you're into random damage, I'm not the guy you're looking for, Zuko thought, giving them a dark glance.

Either blind to the hint or deliberately ignoring it, Jet stepped closer. "Here's the deal. I hear the captain's eating like a king, while us refugees have to feed off his scraps. Doesn't seem fair, does it?"

Life's not fair, Zuko thought dryly. Armed, no adults with them, no one as sane as even Sokka in the bunch, and mad at the world. He definitely needed to put distance between himself and these idiots.

"What sort of king is he eating like?" Iroh wondered.

...Argh.

"The fat, happy kind," Jet said sardonically. "You want to help us liberate some food?"

Smug, charming, and knows how to find people's weak spots. Zuko stared over the lake, and nodded. "I'm in."

I want you where I can see you.

"I'm sorry, Uncle," Zuko said, voice low enough that none of their fellow passengers would hear him through the joyous laughter as Jet handed out food. "He thinks he knows something."

"And the best way to be certain he looks no deeper, is to allow him to think you are firmly in league with him," Iroh nodded. He'd noted the rebel's charisma as well; confined as they were with a ferry full of refugees who feared the Fire Nation, Zuko had every right to be wary. "Well. A meal was part of the passage price. We will be in the city soon, and able to shake him from our trail."

Longshot and Smellerbee neared, and he could say no more. Only smile, and grip his nephew's shoulder briefly.

We do what we must. But I am glad to see it bothers you.

And glad for a purely selfish reason, as well. His nephew's gaze had cleared, focused on the dangers of the present, rather than the pain he still suppressed. Apparently, furtive dealings did Zuko's spirits good.

Well, and why should they not? I know of many who specialize in covert missions. But has any other firebender ever infiltrated the North Pole?

Like healing, it was a dubious skill for a Fire Nation noble to claim. But unquestionably useful, so long as they remained fugitives.

I wonder. Is there any way he can put such skills to good use? Something I could encourage freely?

Something to think on, as he exchanged polite nods and dug into the bounty with his nephew and the two young rebels. A better meal than he'd had in some days, truth be told. Particularly once Zuko slipped a few tea sweets out of his sleeve when no one was watching. No longer graceful, outlines of maple leaves and cherry blossoms blurred by squishing, but still a lovely contrast to plain hot water. No tea, unfortunately. Well, one couldn't expect everything.

Food, drink... yes, we should have some conversation as well, Iroh decided. If only to keep Jet convinced waterbending was Lee's only secret. And in truth, he was curious. "So, Smellerbee. That's an unusual name for a young man."

"Maybe it's because I'm not a man. I'm a girl!" Obviously irritated, she stood and stalked off.

Oops. "Oh, now I see!" he called after her. "It's a beautiful name for a lovely young girl!"

Zuko's face didn't so much as twitch. Iroh wasn't sure if that was lack of surprise, unusual self-control, or simple teenage hunger overriding the brain to the point that his nephew wouldn't have cared if Smellerbee were a uniformed platypus-bear, so long as she didn't grab for his bowl.

Teenage firebender, Iroh reminded himself wryly, as the silent Longshot caught his young lady friend and didn't have a conversation. *Hunger is most likely*.

Drifting on the polar seas had been bad enough. Hunted as fugitives, only able to pause in one place long enough to gain meager supplies before prudence advised they move on... he could afford to lose the weight, but his nephew was too lean to be healthy.

Even if he were not bending, I think he may have grown an inch, Iroh thought ruefully. Late bloomers ran at least as strongly in Sozin's line as prodigies, but no one had ever convinced his brother of that. *I had hoped he would take more after me than Ozai, but this is not the best timing*.

Jet sat down with them, still caught up in the excitement of the crowd's adulation. "From what I heard, people eat like this every day in Ba Sing Se. I can't wait to set my eyes on that giant wall."

"It is a magnificent sight," Iroh agreed. *And a terrifying one*.

Jet raised a bushy brow. "So you've been there before?"

"Once," the retired general admitted. "When I was a different man." If events had been different, if he had been different....

If I had not been the Dragon of the West, would Zuko still be alive?

He doubted it. He very much doubted it. Zuko was stubborn and resilient and persevering, but the odds had been stacked too heavily against him for any young prince to survive. Much less succeed.

Now, if he could only convince Zuko of that.

"I've done some things in my past that I'm not proud of," Jet said in a low voice. "But that's why I'm going to Ba Sing Se, for a new beginning. A second chance."

"That's very noble of you," Iroh said thoughtfully. *I think you even believe it*. Whether or not the boy could hold to it - well. Theft from the captain was not a promising start. "I believe people can change their lives, if they want to." He looked at his nephew. "I believe in second chances."

Too late, he realized how Zuko might take that. *Capturing the Avatar is not a second chance, nephew!*

But he couldn't say it. Not with Jet studying them both.

"So what'd you do to a waterbender?" Zuko said levelly.

"What makes you think I've even met another waterbender?" Jet smirked.

Zuko gave him a hard, flat look.

Iroh recognized it. From mirrors. That was a general's look.

You're trying to look clever. I'm so impressed. Get your head out of your ass and start giving me straight answers before I feed you your insignia.

Of all the tricks of command he'd tried to teach his nephew, why did that one have to stick?

"Nothing you need to worry about," Jet said at last, not smiling. "She and her idiot brother and that kid.... You're more realistic than she'll ever be." He snorted. "Like the Fire Nation didn't do enough to the South Pole already. Maybe that's why they got away with it."

Iroh's eyes widened, and he couldn't help but glance at Zuko. Who had gone very, very still.

Katara.

It could be another waterbender. But Southern Tribe, with her brother? He doubted there was another bender left that far south, after the Sea Ravens had done their butcher's work.

If this young man had managed to draw that young lady's ire, he had a great deal to make up for, indeed.

Well. One could say as much for my nephew.

No, that was not fair. Prince Zuko's quest forced him to be at odds with the young waterbender, so long as she defended *the Avatar. This young man, who claimed to fight for freedom - meaning, most likely, against the Fire Nation - what, exactly, could he have done?*

Whatever it was, Zuko is right. We will be better off away from this boy.

Morning. No place to practice katas, not with so many people. But it was misty enough that Zuko could almost pretend to be alone, as he stood at the prow and practiced his breathing. In, and out. In. And out.

He'd lost breath control against Azula, that awful day she'd tried to lure him into chains with promises of Father's forgiveness. Lost his breath, lost his temper, lost the battle.

I'm not going to let that happen again.

He couldn't work on stance. Couldn't even run katas without fire, not with so many eyes. But he could breathe.

...Or he could, if one charismatic annoyance weren't trying to pad up behind him from his bad side.

You want people to trust you, but more than that, you want to be in charge. So you can't help twisting the knife, with little things you think people won't notice. And I bet most of them don't. I bet your little band thinks you're gold. I bet Katara liked you too, until you did something stupid.

Azula would eat you for lunch.

"You know, as soon as I saw your scar, I knew exactly who you were."

Oh, hell.

He'd kept his head when the Ocean Spirit had tried to drown him. He was not going to panic now.

A breath, and he glanced at Jet warily.

"You're an outcast, like me," Jet went on, standing beside him. "And us outcasts have to stick together. We have to watch each other's backs, because no one else will."

An offer, blatant as a dagger wrapped in silk.

Join up with me. Or don't, and leave me wondering why.

Damn it, Uncle and I never worked out what to do if someone wanted us around!

"Is there a healer on board?"

One of the crew, eyeing Jet's hook-swords narrowly as he kept a grip on a sweating refugee man.

Now what?

"Please!" the refugee blurted to the deck at large, littered with people still mostly asleep in the mist. "My wife - there's so much blood - is there anyone-?"

Jet forgotten, Zuko ran for his kit.

...I smell like blood.

Wearily, Zuko sat back away from his patient, as the husband hugged and kissed his still-pale wife with a flood of tears. "Make sure she gets all the water she wants to drink," he told the phlegmatic gray-haired aunt beside him. "Tea would be better. Boiled water. She got sick off that slop from yesterday. Wouldn't have mattered, if she hadn't been...." He groped at air, unable to find the right words.

"Torn up from the birth," the aunt nodded, cradling a small bundle of person that had slept through the whole thing. "Three weeks ago. I thought she was fine." She grimaced. "She swore she was fine."

"Fresh meat," Zuko went on tiredly. "Fish, if you're sure it's fresh. She's healed, but she needs to build her blood back up." He frowned. There was something he was forgetting, he knew it.

"Salt," Uncle Iroh said firmly, appearing in his field of vision. "Her blood is thin enough. Nursing the little one will make things worse, if she does not have enough." He smiled, and offered a steaming cup. "She's not the only one who could use some, it would seem."

"Mmph?" Zuko managed, half of it already downed. Sweet, with a little salt; where had Uncle gotten it?

"We've reached the docks." Iroh still smiled, but his eyes glanced toward the direction of the ramp. "And we appear to have drawn some attention."

...Damn.

"We're not from the Foggy Swamp!"

"Of course you're not, Mr. Lee," the customs lady said dryly, re-stamping their papers with enough red ink to make them bleed. "No one ever is."

City Guard Huojin watched the old gentleman - Mushi, if the info Amaya had gotten from certain contacts was right - whisper something into the furious teen's ear, and had to stifle a laugh. Given that sparkle of pure mischief in the genial face, that was probably go with it, Lee. Which wasn't at all what you'd expect from an Earth Kingdom refugee... but made far too much sense, given what they actually were.

Amaya's refugees always had a story to tell. These two looked to be more interesting than most.

Making his way over to the booth, he cleared his throat. "Is there a problem, Ma'am?"

"No, no problem," Mushi said swiftly, looking innocent as a pygmy puma kitten. "We were only distracted by such a rare loveliness." He turned back toward the official, smile charming as an antelope-fox. "May I just say that you're like a flower in bloom, your beauty intoxicating."

Mole over her eyebrow and all, she smiled. "You're pretty easy on the eyes yourself, handsome. Raorrr."

I'm going to die laughing. Right here, right now, Huojin snickered to himself, as the teen looked like he wanted to drop dead of pure mortification. *No, keep it together, they're probably scared stiff under the bluff.*

"But it doesn't get you out of the facts!" She jabbed the handle of her stamp Lee's way.

"Unlicensed healers cannot practice in Ba Sing Se! Waterbenders or not!"

Whoa, whoa - what? Huojin thought.

"She was bleeding to death!" Lee defended himself.

"And the ferry was not quite in Ba Sing Se," his older relative interposed smoothly. "Surely, now that we know the law-"

"Rules are rules! Rules maintain order. Like it or not, there has to be an investigation!"

"And hold up the line for how long?" Huojin pointed out. "Probably all day, if everyone on the ferry has to be questioned. That's an awful way to welcome good citizens trying to make a new life in our city. If they weren't docked, he didn't break the law."

She scowled, and opened her mouth-

"What he needs is a *license*," Huojin went on, before she could quote chapter and verse at him.

"I'm due to go off-shift soon anyway. I can escort them to Healer Amaya, and she can examine his training. I'm sure she'll summon the proper authorities if there's a problem."

"Well... I suppose that would be acceptable...."

"You are as gracious as you are lovely," Mushi smiled. "We will not forget this kindness."

"You'd better not," she said dryly, adding final entry stamps before handing the papers back.

"You're just lucky you caught me on a good day."

"Immensely fortunate," Mushi declared, bowing. The teen swallowed, but followed his lead.

Awkward bow, and he has to stop his hands from shaping the Flame, Huojin observed. Mushi can pass, but that poor kid can't have been outside the Fire Nation more than a few months.

...And he's a trained fighter. Who's already messed with the wrong firebender. Oh boy. Amaya's going to have her work cut out for her with this one. "If you'll follow me, gentlemen?"

As he escorted them onto the train, Huojin felt eyes on the back of his neck, and glanced back. Lone teenager. Hook swords. Brown eyes dark and suspicious and angry.

Hell. Hope he didn't get a look at their eyes.

Thank the Spirits Ba Sing Se's so big. Odds are, this is the last he'll ever see them.

He led them into one of the emptier cars, and sat on the outside edge of their bench, trusting his uniform to keep other passengers at bay. "I'm Guard Huojin. I hear you're travelers from far away... and that you've had a touch of heatstroke."

"What?" Lee asked warily.

"Yes, we are," Mushi plainly, relaxing. "Where are we going, really?"

"Healer Amaya's," Huojin said frankly. "We're old friends. Took me in when I was six, for a while. She's good at helping people make a clean start."

"Oh?"

"You'll see when you get there." Huojin smiled, taking those odd gold eyes. He'd seen plenty on those Amaya helped over the years, but they were always startling.

Especially Lee's. Most Fire Nation gold still had a hint of hazel in it. Lee's were paler. Purer.

And he's a waterbender?

Well. If that were true, the kid had a really good reason to run. Way better than most of those who ended up on Amaya's doorstep.

Better than the reasons you know about, Huojin reminded himself. When it's honor, you know they don't like to talk about it.

"I'm not going to tell you you're safe now," Huojin said in a low tone, as the car began to fill up with refugees. "But you got this far, and that's no small thing. I did, too, but I can't take the credit. I was six. My parents were the brave ones."

As the train left the station, Mushi raised a curious brow, but obviously refrained from asking. Lee, though-

Lee stared at him, just for an instant. As if he could stare right through Earth Kingdom green eyes to-

Shaken, Huojin looked away. *Oma and Shu. What was that?*

Nothing to do with Oma and Shu at all, he feared.

Loyalty. Damn loyalty.

His parents hadn't had time to teach him much about where they'd been born, but they'd taught him

enough. And he'd pulled up more from Amaya's refugees. The ones who made it... and the ones who didn't. Couldn't.

He was thirty-six. Good job, loving wife, two joyous little daughters, good friends. And yet every once in a while, he got ambushed by the feeling of something *missing*.

"You don't have a loyal lord, Huojin," quiet Meixiang Wen had told him, one of the times he and their fellow hidden folk got together to discuss things her earthbender husband didn't want to know about. "Some of us have, and left them; some of us were told to run. You've never had the choice, or the order." She'd had to stop, then, and look at him with a mother's worry. "I hope you can bear it. Most of my children are all earth, but Jinhai...."

Yeah. The boy was game enough, and cheery, but definitely took after his mother in more than build. Meixiang's other children hadn't needed Amaya's help to hide. Jinhai had.

Just like these two would.

Why does this kid get to me?

They hit the Lower Ring before he could puzzle it out. The train stopped, and he rose, brusquely gesturing for them to precede him. *Have to make this look official.*

Besides, twitchy as Lee was, he sure didn't want the kid behind him in a closed space.

He could have found his way to Amaya's clinic blindfolded. Not the best part of the Lower Ring, sure, but far from the worst. And not much to look at on the outside. But looks were deceiving. Most people didn't have their own private well. Amaya did, thanks to some of her grateful earthbending patients working together to dig down to pure, fresh water.

That wasn't all they'd dug. But so far, even the Dai Li seemed to believe Amaya's underground hidey-holes were just esoteric treatment rooms, good for compounding light-sensitive medicines and treating soldiers whose nerves had been shattered by too much time on the Wall.

Let's hope it stays that way.

Huojin knocked on the clinic door, and ushered them in without bothering to listen for an answer. "I found them, Amaya."

"Thank you, my friend." Graceful in a lightweight, long-sleeved indigo dress, the graying Water Tribe woman stroked a last bit of glowing water along what had been a carpenter's broken arm. "Choose your next tavern game more carefully. Wrestling with earthbenders never ends well."

"But he was such a skinny guy!" her patient started to complain. Caught her look, and snorted. "Sure. Don't mind the paying client. Charity comes first."

Lee bristled, eyes narrowed, mouth a thin line as Mushi put a hand on his arm.

Great. Fire Nation temper, in spades. "This is official Guard business," Huojin said levelly. "Mister...?"

The man forced a smile. "Actually, I was just leaving. Sir."

"I'm sure you were."

"You enjoyed that," Amaya chuckled ruefully, after the man had scurried out.

"When you've got a temper, use it for a good cause," Huojin shrugged. "Besides. You've had a lot of charity cases this year. We don't want people connecting the dots."

"We're not-" But Lee's burst of temper died half-formed, as the teen looked between them, good eye widening. "We're... not the only ones, are we?"

"I suspected as much," Mushi said thoughtfully. "Interesting."

"And something better not spoken of here," Amaya said politely. "Come with me."

She led the way underground, stone steps twisting and turning so none of the lower chambers were visible from above, and even sound barely carried. Huojin brought up the rear, quietly ready for anything. Amaya's help was effective, but sometimes - traumatic.

Hope the kid's not a runner, Huojin thought practically, standing where he could move between them and their gear as Amaya charmed them into putting it down. Normally, he wouldn't take a kid Lee's age with dao seriously. Teenagers generally didn't know how to use one sword well enough to bother him, much less dual blades.

Normally. But this kid had made it all the way from the Fire Nation to Ba Sing Se. He wouldn't be here if he couldn't use what he was carrying.

Lantern-light glowed over Amaya's sober face as she gestured for her guests to sit in simple wooden chairs, then sank into her own. "I don't know your names," she began simply. "With luck, I never will. You are Lee and Mushi. And there is a reason for that."

"The Dai Li, or Azulon's list?" Mushi asked soberly.

"Azulon's what?" Lee asked, uncertain.

"You would not have heard; our family never earned such unpleasant attention," Mushi said gravely. "Let us say, it is known the Fire Lords keep lists of those to be dealt with permanently. Yet what is less known is that some seem added with no act of treason or disfavor to their name. And, I have heard, some few of those have not been found. Alive or dead." He raised a questioning brow at Amaya.

"The Fire Lord has no power here. But the Dai Li..." Amaya inclined her head. "Whatever you know, is likely wrong. They are skilled earthbenders, swift and silent. They protect their city, far more than its walls could ever do. And they protect it from itself... by silencing all talk of the war within these walls." She hesitated, blue eyes full of sorrow. "I've tried to help some of those they have taken. What they do to people, to their very spirits... I was Northern Water Tribe. I know what the Fire Nation tried to do to my people, eighty-five years ago. But no one deserves that." She looked at them again, gaze alight with fierce determination. "And you are Fire Nation. You are the war. If they find you, even if they let you live... you wouldn't be yourselves anymore."

"We are not the war, Lady Amaya," Mushi said plainly. "I will not lie to you; I was a soldier, once. But that was many years ago. And my nephew is innocent."

"Uncle!"

"Well, you are. Technically." Laughing gold eyes turned serious. "If this is so, Lady Amaya, then I thank you for your truthfulness. Allow us to find shelter for the night, and we will trouble you no more."

"Planning to run again?" Huojin put in.

"We don't have a choice." Lee's voice was grim. "I knew this was a trap."

"And in a funny way, that's what makes this so safe." Huojin shrugged, eyes sober. "I told you, she took me in. After she found me." *Spirits, I don't want to say this. But - the kid looks like hell. If they run again, they're not going to make it.* "After the Dai Li caught my parents."

Twin golden gazes burned into him. "You were born of the Fire Nation?" Mushi asked, thoughtful.

"In the colonies," Huojin nodded. "If you want to make it here, you can. Just keep your heads down, and let Amaya help you."

Mushi inclined his head, and looked back toward Amaya. "How?"

"I can't tell you, until I'm sure the Dai Li will never know," the healer said plainly. "All I can do, is ask you to trust me."

"A grave request," Mushi said quietly. And nodded. "What must we do?"

"Uncle, you can't!" Lee protested.

"Sometimes, one must take a leap of faith." Mushi gripped his nephew's shoulder gently, and regarded Amaya with a level gold gaze. "Shall we begin?"

Faith, right, Huojin thought wryly. *But you're still giving the kid a chance to run if things go wrong.* Spirits. What had these two been through, to have that level of unthinking trust in each other?

They got here. Whatever it was, it was bad.

Amaya stood, and coaxed a ball of water from a pitcher with a wave of her hand. Kneaded it with her fingers, until only pure water remained. "Close your eyes. This is a delicate technique."

Huojin made himself stay calm and steady as Amaya cupped Mushi's brow in glowing hands. It'd been years, but he still remembered how it had felt, cool water seeping into every nook and cranny of self-

And carefully, gently, lifting a paper-thin layer of it out and away. Changed.

This is Huojin, had been the not-quite-words in his mind. *Let him be your sword and shield. An innocent citizen of the Earth Kingdom. Let him breathe. Let him be.*

He'd worn Huojin as a second skin so long, it was hard to remember he'd ever been anyone else. This was home. These were his people.

But the first few days - it's hard. I hope Mushi is as level-headed as he looks.

Amaya lifted her hands away, and Mushi shivered slightly. "A most curious technique," he mused, eyes still closed. Frowned slightly; lifted a hand and let it fall, in a sway of motion that flowed from arm to arm. "Ah. Not a blockage. The energies are merely a bit unsettled."

"You can sense that?" Amaya's brows climbed. "It's the influence of water. It will calm within a day or so, as your chi adapts."

"Hmm. And what does that mean, precisely?"

Huojin kept a frown off his face. Amaya didn't usually explain this part while they still had

somebody untreated in the room.

She's trying to calm the kid down. Hope it works.

"It means what it means," Amaya said simply. "Healing touches the spirit as well as the body. I ask water to accept you. To protect you. And I ask your energies to accept it." She smiled, looking into memory. "I met an... interesting teacher, on my journey from the North. I never thought I would use his gift to help those of the Fire Nation. But you're running from the war. How can I not help heal those sick of all this death?"

Mushi inclined his head. "We are grateful for your care." He blinked, finally, and looked at Lee. "Nephew-"

The kid exploded.

Huojin had expected a dash for the stairs; a grab for the dao. Spirits, he'd even - a little - expected slack-jawed shock. Though not really, Lee was wound too tight and balanced on his feet too well to let bad situations paralyze him for even an instant.

He did *not* expect the sizzling arc of flame that snapped straight at Amaya's head.

Oma and Shu. He's a firebender!

Huojin grabbed for him anyway. He was taller than the kid. Older. Stronger. And pin most bender's arms, they were done for. Granted, he was going to end up with bruises; the kid was mad as a wet pygmy puma and wanted to kill something-

He was never able to work out exactly what happened next. Somewhere in there was a head-butt and an elbow-jab and a hook of an ankle around his knee to hit a spot that made his leg collapse like flicked tiles, and - Koh's lair, the kid could kick fire with his feet-!

...Ow.

But he'd held on just long enough, and Mushi moved in with a tricky series of strikes that kept Lee busy for a few seconds-

Just long enough for Amaya's shirshu dart to kick in. Gasping, the kid went limp.

Not letting go, Mushi glanced back at the healer. "Do you wish to tell me why my nephew tried to kill you?"

"Tried to kill her?" Huojin muttered under his breath, getting to shaky feet. Damn, Lee fought dirty.

"If my nephew had meant to harm you, Huojin, you would already be dead," Mushi said bluntly.

Say what? Ex-soldier, yes. He could believe Mushi had trained Lee to fight. But to be sure he would kill....

Oh, hell. Lee's... but even the Fire Nation doesn't put kids on the front line! What happened to him?

"Amaya was his only target," Mushi went on. "Why?"

Sighing, she swept a ball of water into a frozen sheet in her hands, making a rough mirror. "This is why."

Mushi looked, and went very still.

Remember what that's like, too, Huojin thought, sympathy outweighing even shock and bruises. The first time you looked, really looked, and saw green instead of gold.... *Feels like the world went tilt.*

Some people screamed. Others cried. Most, Amaya had to sedate to sleep it out; one reason she had shirshu darts on hand.

Mushi? Tough as steel. He only looked, and let out a slow breath. "I see." He knelt then, and cradled the silent teen close. "Work swiftly. My nephew has been struck by a shirshu before. He has built up some resistance. And the inner fire can be used to rid oneself of poisons, if one is determined. I have no doubt he is attempting that as we speak."

"No." Weak; almost soundless from the venom. But clear. "Don't do this."

"This is our best chance, nephew." Green held gold, with all a father's worry. "It does not hurt-

"I can't. I won't! I'm not a traitor!"

Setting his jaw, Huojin swore silently. *Spirits. The kid is screwed.*

Not just Fire Nation, firebender. The loyalty that just tweaked Huojin, or made someone like Meixiang scared and sad, was part of this kid's life. Literally.

Fire Nation traitors died. Amaya tried, but some of her refugees couldn't make it. Not, didn't want to. *Couldn't*. A firebender....

"It is not treachery to live, nephew!" Mushi held on tight. "I could order you, as your teacher. I could command, as your elder. But I beg this of you! Live. Live, and make your own destiny!" His voice dropped. "I need you, nephew. I do not think I can survive the loss of another son."

"Thought she'd killed you. Thought-" Lee's eyes slipped closed, tears running from the good one. "...Do it."

Water in hand, Amaya held back. "You're a firebender. Water is your opposite. This could kill you!"

"It did not kill me," Mushi said bluntly.

Two firebenders? Huojin thought, stunned. *How? Why?*

"And what pursues my nephew will be his death, if you cannot aid us. We have no choice." Mushi laid a hand against the scarred cheek. "Do not fight. Flow with it. Let it carry you. Remember what you told me of the turtle-seals. You found a path then. Find one now." Looking at Amaya, he nodded.

Face pale and drawn, she laid glowing hands on Lee's head. Huojin held his breath, seeing her hope, her determination-

And her utter despair, as Lee's heart stopped.

A/N: Okay, so the whole "spiritual metamorphosis" idea in canon bugged me. Especially given the results in Crossroads of Destiny. I have something different in mind. Very different.

...Hey, Aang can't be the only person who ever got Really, Really Lost at sea. (Insert Evil Writer Grin here.)

And I have to admit this particular bunny has bugged me ever since my brain latched onto the whole "the Avatar is the only person who can master all four elements". (

Chapter 9

Dark.

Zuko coughed, and rolled over, staring blearily up at a sky full of stars. No sign of the Crown or the Wheel among the constellations; couldn't be too far north or south, then. *But I'm not in Ba Sing Se anymore. Am I?*

Uneasy, he summoned a flame for a look around-

Nothing.

"That won't work here, you know."

That voice. He knew that voice, and that face, as the young man in a Fire Nation uniform stepped out of the shadows of a tree. But it wasn't *possible*.

"It's been a while, cousin."

The voice, and the smile. So much like Uncle's.

He was crying as he hit outstretched arms, and for once - just once - he didn't care at all. "Lu Ten...."

"It's okay. It's okay, Zuko. I've got you. I won't let you fall."

Lu Ten let him cry himself out, rocking him gently. Waited until his breath hitched, and Zuko scrubbed his tears away. "How is he?" Lu Ten asked quietly.

Uncle. "He's okay. He misses you." Zuko swallowed hard. "He's going to be so angry at me. I promised to stay, I *tried*...." *And I failed. Again.*

"Zuko!" Lu Ten gripped his shoulders. "Calm down. You're not dead yet."

"But-"

"You're here, yes. But you're not dead."

The Spirit World? Doesn't make sense.

Uncle. It should be Uncle here, Iroh would understand why the world had gone crazy....

Iroh should get to see Lu Ten. Not him.

"Zuko. Focus." Lu Ten bent a quiet smile his way. "Trust me, it's not your fault things turned out like this. You're stubborn; it runs in the family. You'll find a way out."

Here. Just where is-? Zuko swallowed, seeing the tree, the hill, the great wall in the distance. "This is your grave."

"Well, it's convenient. We're not tied to them... but it makes some things simpler." Lu Ten glanced around. "We need to get you back, and I don't think I can do it alone." Gold eyes fixed on his. "Do you know anyone else here who would help you?"

"Here?" Zuko managed. "I know a *kamui* who wants to tear my throat out, but-" He caught that hint of a smirk, not nearly as subtle as Uncle's. "You knew!"

"I did get to see that," Lu Ten admitted, grinning. "You two? Were fantastic." He ruffled Zuko's hair. "Who'd have thought the kid who was always tripping over himself could get that good? And what a show! Fire, drama, vengeance!" He winked. "And on top of all that, I got to hang out with a *lovely* girl."

"Ping," Zuko breathed. "Ping Lu Yu."

The world *shifted*.

And they were walking beside a cairn of rocks, where an Earth Kingdom girl barely his age sat singing to a cooing, gold-eyed infant.

She looked up at them, and smiled. "Lu Ten!" Her smile shifted, more bittersweet. "Hello, Lee."

He sat down beside her. It seemed like the right thing to do. "...I'm sorry."

"It wasn't your fault." Her smile was pretty, but sad. "Not everything is, you know."

"I wish - I wish I could have been there," Zuko blurted out. "I wish I could have helped."

"You saved my mother," Ping said plainly. "You saved Asahi. The world is broken, but you've never stopped trying. That's brave, Lee. It matters."

"My name's not-"

"Isn't it?" She touched his lips for silence, and smiled past him at Lu Ten. "So. Someone's interfering?"

"Heavy-handed. But they probably figured this was the only shot they'd get," Lu Ten said wryly.

"Why? I'm not the Avatar!" Zuko growled. "Why do the spirits want to tamper with *my* life? Isn't it bad enough already- Why are you *laughing*?"

Still snickering, Lu Ten shook his head. "Zuko. You give spirits a *headache*."

"What?"

"Sozin broke part of the world, and we've been paying for it ever since," Lu Ten said seriously. "He twisted destinies, and so ours have been twisted. And a lot of spirits were satisfied with that. They don't... really get humans, a lot of them. So long as we suffer, they think they've fixed the problem. And they don't understand why it keeps getting worse." He smiled. "But you? You *fight* destiny. They throw something at you, it bounces off. Or you cut your way through it. Or it *does* stick, and you keep going anyway, until you walk it into the ground *begging* for mercy. You're *Fire Nation*. You *don't quit*."

He looked about then, apparently considering something. "Sometimes you have to go back to go forward. We have Fire, and Earth." Gold eyes met his, sober again. "Who do you know in the Water Tribes?"

No one I'd want to meet here. Zuko had fought Water Tribe warriors, before he'd ever visited Katara's little village. North or South, they didn't care if his ship wasn't part of the war. It was Fire Nation, and that was all that mattered.

He'd fought, and he'd killed. His men deserved no less.

"There's no one who would help you?" Lu Ten said quietly. "No one who ever has?"

Katara.

Stones blurred into ice and snow.

This doesn't look good.

Not the small, igloo and tent village he remembered. This was a town; the ruins of one, still smoldering, once safe behind carved walls of ice. Not as grand as the North Pole, but it didn't look anything like where he'd found Sokka. And the Avatar.

"It wouldn't." A woman's voice, forbidding as an ice cliff. "You destroyed this place long ago."

He spun around, looking for the voice's owner. "I've never been here."

Blue and white furs stepped out of blowing snow. A dark-haired Water Tribe woman, about his mother's age, with pale blue eyes relentless as winter. "The Fire Nation was," she said coldly. "And you are the Fire Nation. Aren't you, Prince Zuko?"

My throne. My country. My honor.

And yet.... "I didn't do this."

"There are many things you haven't done." Blue eyes flashed. "What have you done, besides hunt my children across the very world? You kill and burn and destroy; nothing stops you from getting what you want! Nothing but my children, who put themselves between the Avatar and harm. What makes you different from the rest of your murdering kind? What gives you the right to ask anything of me?"

Zuko stiffened, and glared right back. "Nothing."

"Cousin," Lu Ten murmured.

Zuko shook his head. *This is my fight.* "If I hadn't hunted them, Zhao would have. Without anyone interfering. If I hadn't chased them - and I don't *want* to kill them, no matter how annoying your son is - someone would have wiped them out of the world with a fireblast months ago." Gold eyes narrowed. "But you don't care what I *haven't* done."

"And I thought you were going to try to convince me." The tilt of her head was so familiar, he half-expected to be buried in ice.

I know you, Zuko realized. *I know enough.* "I don't have to convince you."

"A prince's arrogance." She gave him a dark look. "I'm not surprised."

"You're Katara's mother." It's not arrogance. Not if you're right. "She does what's right. Even when it's hard. Even when she hates you." He met her glare for glare. "I'm not supposed to be here."

"No. You're not." The cold wind died, and she looked him up and down. "But it won't help. I know what you're trying-"

You're ahead of me, then. Spirits!

"-You're one short. Who are you going to find?"

Fire. Earth. Water. Air. Zuko swallowed, and shook his head. "I don't know."

"It's not an easy question," Lu Ten allowed. "But the past isn't as far away as people think. Not when there are those who still remember."

If we'd known each other back then....

"Kuzon," Zuko breathed. "Kuzon of Byakko. He'd know somebody." He glanced at Lu Ten. "Where can I find him?"

"I can't tell you."

Laughter in gold eyes. Faint and rueful, but definitely laughter. "Can't, or won't?" Zuko demanded.

"Both," Lu Ten admitted. "I already told you; you're not dead. Some things, you just can't know."

So close. So *close*, and it was all going to fall apart. Like everything else he tried fell apart.

No. I am not going to die on Uncle. Not here. Not this way.

Reading the constellations above, he started walking north.

"Zuko?" Lu Ten, beside him easily as breathing.

"You were at Ba Sing Se. Ping was at her cairn. Katara's mother was at *her* grave." Knuckles white, he headed for the ocean. "I'm going to the Southern Air Temple." *Even if I have to swim.*

Ice-mist blurred, and he was standing on a windswept mountainside.

Lu Ten's fingers brushed his hair, faint as a breath of wind. "This is as far as we can take you," he murmured. "Without someone to search for, you have to get there on your own."

Wind blew, and he was gone.

"Don't worry," Zuko muttered. "I'm used to it."

Eyes picking a way over sheer rock, he started climbing.

No gear. No backup. No plan.

Not like it was the first time.

For a world of spirits, it felt real enough. Rocks tore at him. Air got thinner, biting at his lungs. Muscles trembled and weakened, pushed to their limits.

How did anyone ever live up here?

But every time he thought he'd made real progress up the slopes, the cliff fell away up, in an arc even the Avatar's lemur couldn't have climbed. Which was *not* like real mountains. At all.

Right. Not like spirits have to play fair.

Thunder rumbled, as if the sky itself smirked at him.

Of. Course.

He'd seen storms sweep up the mountains at home, he knew how fast they moved. It was still impossible. One moment, only the down-blast of wind. The next-

A flood of rain, weakening holds already slipping from torn fingers. Howling wind, prying his body away from ragged stone. Thunder cracked, lightning shattering a cliff near enough to shower him with stones.

"Is that all you've got?"

The storm darkened. Thickened, lightning flashing from cloud-top to cloud-top like the sky cracking its knuckles.

"Why stop there?" Digging his fingers into bare cracks, Zuko glared at the sky. "You've always thrown everything you could at me! Well, I can take it! Come on! Strike me! You've never held back before!"

The storm howled. Stones gave way, he was *slipping*-

Worn fingers caught his, and *pulled*.

"Gently, my young friend. You've had a busy day."

He sounded like Aang. Sort of. If Aang had made it to eighty and had some sense knocked into him. Zuko blinked, and looked up-

A vaulted ceiling. No storm in sight. *But we were just- Spirit World. Doesn't have to make sense.*

Daring, he looked at his rescuer. Shaved head, long white mustaches, yellow and orange robe... airbender tattoos.

"A very long day," the monk chuckled softly. "But here you are. With love, compassion, and honor."

Zuko stared. Turned, and looked.

Behind him, Lu Ten winked back, one arm wrapped around Ping's shoulders. Beside them, the Water Tribe woman rolled her eyes.

Unsettled, Zuko looked back at the airbender, in time to see one white brow go up in curiosity. "Friends and allies are the greatest of treasures," the monk said plainly. "What more could you need?"

"Truth," Zuko blurted out. "How do I get out of here? Why did I end up here in the first place?" He swallowed, mouth dry. "Why aren't you angry with me?"

"Should I be?" Under the mildness, gray eyes were sharp. "Have you broken your promise?"

Which one? "I don't think so," Zuko said warily.

"No, you have not," the monk nodded in satisfaction. "And as I recall, you never promised to be gentle. 'Drag him home by the scruff of the neck and *make* him apologize for scaring us like that', I believe you said."

What? "You're confusing me with someone else."

"That is possible," the airbender nodded. "Many things are possible. Even promises that last a

lifetime, and beyond." A knowing wink. "Sometimes the spirits remember those. When it is to their advantage."

"You should play Pai Sho with Uncle," Zuko muttered. "I don't need koans. I need answers!"

"Ah. But to find your answers, first you must find the right questions." The monk smiled, waving off hints of imminent explosion. "But I forget how much need fire has for haste. I do not hate you. I would even say that I am greatly in your debt. I may have taught Aang to master air, but I also loved him. And some things, one who loves as a father cannot easily teach a young son. That the world can be cruel. That people may hate, without cause or reason. That evil can come in friendly guise." He met Zuko's gaze, stern as the mountains. "That even one who seems your most fearsome enemy, may act with honor, and justice."

Zuko stiffened, but held his ground. "I did what I had to."

"And that is a truth my young pupil had not faced," the monk said evenly. "It was not a kind lesson, nor one easy to watch. But I love Aang too much to deny that he *needed* it." White-wreathed lips quirked in a smile. "You may have detected a bit of... flightiness, in the boy."

"Never would have noticed," Zuko deadpanned.

The monk broke up in laughter. "I see your sense of humor hasn't changed!"

"I'm not who you think I am," Zuko insisted. "I don't know you!"

"Oh? Then it would seem my manners are lacking." He bowed. "I am Gyatso."

This is a bad idea. A really, really bad idea. But Zuko forced himself to return the bow. "My name is Zuko. Son of Ursa, and Fire Lord Ozai." *And this is the end.*

"Nephew of Iroh, and grandson of Azulon, among others," Gyatso nodded. "A fact *someone* has taken shameless advantage of, I think."

Moonlight shone through the vaulted hall, and she was there. *"So he found you."*

"Did you think he wouldn't?" the Water Tribe woman said dryly. "He's Fire Nation. They finish what they start." A bittersweet smile. "Or they try to."

"It was a necessary risk." The white-robed princess almost touched the floor, white hair flowing like water. *"Your uncle asked a question. There was division on the answer. It could not be decided. It is still undecided. The Avatar is human as well as spirit. He will do what he will do."* She floated closer. *"But you have acted to restore the balance. Even when you could have passed by. And so you have earned my answer."*

Glowing fingers touched his forehead, and the ocean dragged him down.

This cannot be happening.

Iroh was frozen on the floor, heart like stone within him as Amaya frantically tried to revive the boy in his arms. *Mushi* wrapped around his self like a sheath of cool silk, but he could not care. This could not be happening. Not again. They'd come so far. Tried so hard. The world could not be so cruel, not twice-

Zuko spasmed in his arms, coughing up water.

What in the world?

Questions later. He helped the boy twist, supported him as Zuko choked out enough liquid to drown an ostrich-horse. Much less an underfed teenager.

"Tui and La!" Amaya breathed, blue eyes round. "How...?"

"Tui and La," Iroh said grimly, "indeed." Thumped Zuko hard on the back, helping him clear the last froth out. He could *see* the faint glow fading from the water as it lingered on the floor. "My nephew seems to attract the spirits' attention. And not in a pleasant way." He lowered his voice. "Lee?"

"Yue said... you asked a question." Zuko breathed harshly, ragged as if he'd been dragged up from deep water. "Not sure... I can live through another answer, Uncle...."

"Yue?" Iroh frowned darkly, and briefly entertained the notion of a koi-fish dinner. That Zuko's life would never be easy, he could accept. That a spirit would strike his nephew to get at *him* - that went beyond even the spirits' stern justice, into cruelty.

Wait, he reminded himself sternly, as Amaya ran her hands over his nephew to heal the inexplicable marks of drowning in deep water. *The spirits' messages are not always clear. Wait, and see what occurs.*

"Ping thinks Lu Ten's cute...."

Iroh blinked. Shook his head, to clear his ears. He couldn't have heard what he thought he'd just heard. Could he? "Nephew?"

"...Don't go."

"I am right here," Iroh said gently, as Zuko's grip slipped into unconsciousness. "I will not leave you." Soberly, he looked at Amaya.

"He's resting," the healer said as she stood, still shaken. "This has *never* happened before, I-" She cut herself off, and bent to feel Zuko's forehead. "And now he has a fever. I don't know why!"

"It is not a physical illness, I think." Iroh frowned at the ghostly dragons entwined around his nephew, snapping and snarling; a larger red, and a smaller, younger moon-white. Somehow, he wasn't surprised. He might be handling the not-quite-other that was Mushi, but he was older, more stable. He knew who he was, and what he wanted. Zuko was still trying to find out.

Reaching over, he tapped on misty scales. "Stop that at once, both of you."

Startled, they looked at him.

"Fight on, and one of you may win," Iroh said bluntly. "But he will have lost something precious to him. To all of us. Strive together, instead. Lean on each other. Learn from each other. You are not enemies. You are my beloved nephew. You always will be."

Abashed, the red dragon licked a wound on the white. Gold eyes closed, and they faded.

"I'm going to hate myself for asking," Huojin said reluctantly, "but - what just happened?"

"Lady Amaya's healing does touch the spirit," Iroh said frankly. "And my nephew was already

divided against himself. I merely needed to remind him of the greater whole." He raised a gray brow. "That was the fever. As for the water - I have a tale you may wish to hear." He paused. "And you may not wish to be sober."

Luli's going to give me a Look when I get home, Huojin thought ruefully, cradling a cup of tea in his hands as he pictured his wife's cheerful exasperation. Not that she'd be too angry; a Guard's hours were never straight from the clock, and the midnight-to-morning shift was one of the worst. She knew that, and they made it work.

Besides. The hair still hadn't settled back down on his neck since Lee'd... drowned, back down there in the basement. If some kind of trouble had just moved into the Lower Ring, he had to know about it.

Tucking Lee under a blanket on a borrowed futon, Mushi drew the screen closed around his nephew, shutting him into a corner of Amaya's small dining room. Sighed, and picked up his cup of tea. "Thank you, Lady Amaya."

"Amaya," the healer said plainly. "I have a feeling we may be seeing much of each other." She sipped her cup. "I've never met another bender who could sense the spirits at work."

"It was an unexpected gift," Mushi said humbly. "And not always a welcome one. But we may be meeting for more than that." Crossing to a wall sconce, he pinched an oil-lamp alight, and brought it back to the table with him. "I believe my nephew left you somewhat bruised."

"Don't worry about it, I've had worse...." Words died in Huojin's throat, as Mushi moved his hands about the flame-

And fire *changed*.

Hands wreathed in burning green, Mushi bent to run fire over his aching knee. Warmth washed through the joint, washing pain away.

Sparks dying around his hands, Mushi straightened. "Lee is much better at this than I am." He regarded them both. "My nephew is not a waterbender. But he is a healer."

A healer. A firebender is a healer? Huojin thought, stunned.

Two firebenders. And how had *firebenders* managed to flee their nation, and survive?

Amaya looked as if she wished her tea had been spiked. "Perhaps you should start from the beginning."

Mushi inclined his head. "I have not been to war in many years, true. But - forgive me, Lady Amaya - it was known that I studied waterbenders. So when Admiral Zhao decided to invade the North Pole, where the Avatar had taken shelter... let us say, I was *invited* to come along."

"My tribe," Amaya whispered, pale.

"The *Avatar*?" Huojin got out. And didn't care if his voice squeaked. The Avatar was a myth, a story for children. No one had seen him. No one had seen him for a *hundred years*.

"Yes," Mushi nodded. Bent a look of warm understanding on Amaya. "They took losses, but they survived. Zhao... overreached himself. He invaded, and did a great deal of damage, but his goal

was more proud than that. More proud, and more evil." He drew a breath. "You may have noticed, when the moon went dark."

"Spirits." Amaya's hand pressed over her breast. "Tui and La...."

"Zhao found their mortal forms, and struck," Mushi said heavily. "I could not stop him, not in time. But the Moon had given some of her life to Princess Yue... and that brave girl, gave it back." He shook his head. "And the Avatar, together with the outraged Ocean, destroyed the entire Fire Navy fleet." A wry smile. "Lee and I spent three very long weeks on a raft, praying we would reach land somewhere safe."

If he hadn't already been sitting down, Huojin had a feeling he would have become forcibly reacquainted with Amaya's floor. Spirits. Spirits getting killed. The Avatar. A whole *fleet* sunk. That was- He shook his head violently, and concentrated on details. "Lee's too young to be a soldier."

"He is," Mushi agreed. "I snuck him on board. It was not safe for him to remain where we had been. Not that it was much safer for him with me," he allowed. "The Ocean Spirit appears to have very poor aim. When it took Zhao - well, I am grateful Lee is dedicated to his training. *He* ducked."

"Ducked," Huojin repeated numbly.

"I did mention some spirits are not fond of my nephew?"

"...Right." Sure, he knew about the small *kamuiy* that appeared in Ba Sing Se; the item-spirits, the two-tailed cat-owls, the other small creatures of mischief. But the *Ocean* and the *Moon*? When, exactly, had the world stopped making sense?

When you saw a teenager drown on dry land.

"In any event, we did reach territory held by the Fire Nation," Mushi went on. "We thought we had found safety. We were, unfortunately, mistaken." He paused a moment, obviously choosing his words. "You do not wish to know our names. That is likely wise. But I will tell you that for my actions against Zhao, I have been declared a traitor to the Dragon Throne, and Lee with me." Another pause. "And did they know what we are capable of, what Lee found himself capable of in our flight, there would be nowhere in the world we could hide."

"Because you can heal?" Huojin shook his head, appalled. He didn't hate his own people, he didn't, but the Fire Lord- spirits.

"Because of *how* they heal." Amaya regarded Mushi with interest. "You are not like other firebenders."

"The teachings of Fire Lords Sozin and Azulon are that fire comes from the darker emotions," Mushi said seriously. "Hate. Pain. Anger. All things that have twisted our nation, and our spirits. But to heal, one must *care*. And with that caring, one learns the fire can come from compassion. Love. Even righteous fury, that will defend the innocent to the death. True firebending, the teaching of the dragons, comes from life itself. What we can do, what we *are*... our very existence proves the Fire Lord is *wrong*."

"And to defy the will of the Fire Lord, is treason," Huojin finished for him.

"Even so."

"So...." Spirits, there was no polite way to say this. "Why aren't you dead?"

Mushi smiled wryly. "I was under the command of Fire Lord Azulon. After he died... you left the colonies at six? Then perhaps you do not know it is customary for those of noble blood to pay formal visits to the new Fire Lord, and assure him of their loyalty." He chuckled. "As my brother's loyalty is beyond question, Fire Lord Ozai neglected to see that I appeared."

There was more to it than that, Huojin could feel it. *But I don't think I need to know.*

Still. There was something Mushi was leaving out that he *did* need to know. If his stunned brain could just focus on *what*.

"You've kidnapped the boy from his father," Amaya said levelly.

Ah. Yeah. That would be it.

"In a way, yes," Mushi admitted. Paused again; not in the calculated manner of a man choosing his words, but the silent ache of looking into painful memory. "Three years ago, my brother declared Lee a failure, and a disgrace. He has traveled with me ever since. Much as it pains me to say, the only reason my brother would care that Lee is with me, is that I am between the boy and those who wish him harm."

Huojin recoiled. "His own father?"

"The power of our nobles rests not merely on blood, but on bending," Mushi said seriously. "Most firebenders show their first sparks by four; five at the latest. Six is very late." A quiet sigh. "Lee did not bend a flame until he was eight."

"Not good?" Huojin asked Amaya. He might be Fire Nation by blood, but she knew bending.

"The Northern Tribe counts blood more than bending in its politics," she said, with a trace of old bitterness. "But no. It isn't. Four years, Huojin. Imagine a proud man, a proud *firebender*, who lives through four years of having his heir considered useless by those in power. Four years of whispers and veiled threats, by all the courtiers around him." She hugged herself, as if feeling a chill off polar ice. "I'm not the first woman of the tribe to flee the power games. I doubt I'll be the last." Forcing her arms straight, she glanced at Mushi. "But if Lee is your brother's heir...."

"There is another child."

"Of course." Amaya sighed, bitterness turning sad. "A stronger bender."

"That, I would not be so certain of," Mushi said thoughtfully. "Lee has always struggled with his bending, yes. He has spent years, learning moves others soar through easily. Only time, dedication, and unerring practice, has given him the skill he now possesses." Mushi paused. "In *Sozin's* style."

Huojin looked between them, as green met blue. There was something being said beyond their words. He wasn't sure he wanted to know what.

Amaya *hmped*. "I haven't forgiven him for trying to kill me, yet."

"I do not ask that you do," Mushi said seriously. And waited.

Minutes passed, and Amaya finally sighed. "A healer. And he can pass as a waterbender?"

"After a fashion," Mushi nodded. "It is more difficult to wring fire's strength from hot water, but

Lee can do it."

"From hot-" Amaya's jaw dropped. Blue eyes darted toward the screen. "He can do that?"

"He can." Mushi smiled. "He thought of it when a man's life rested in our hands, and we dared not betray ourselves."

"*He* thought of it." Her voice was hushed, amazed. "Does he know?"

"I have been afraid to tell him," Mushi said quietly. "My brother's claim that Lee is a failure was very... convincing."

"Not a bender," Huojin pointed out, trying to sort out the sudden tension in the air.

"Huojin." Amaya shook her head, still stunned. "It would be as if - as if I bent water out of *lava*. It exists. It is possible. But to *do* it...."

"I had feared it might be only an uncle's kind eyes," Mushi mused. "Thank you for the confirmation, Lady Amaya."

Huojin eyed the screen himself. "You mean, he's a lot stronger than his father knows."

"Strength has nothing to do with it," Amaya said firmly. "Lee has *imagination*. Will. Determination." Blue eyes all but glowed. "Not one bender in a hundred, not one in a *thousand*, has that tenacity."

Mushi smiled.

"You," Amaya said, and it was almost a chuckle, "are a sly, conniving, scheming old firebender."

Mushi *almost* looked innocent.

"A healing firebender." Amaya did laugh, now. "Training him will be interesting."

Huojin checked that he was still sitting down. "You *want* to train him?"

"If Luli tripped on a piece of jade rough abandoned in the mud," Amaya said wryly, "wouldn't she take it home, and wash it, and see what might be carved from it?" The healer smiled at him.

"You're going to be late."

Well, yes. "You're sure you'll be-?"

"We'll be fine," Amaya said firmly. "Thank you for your help, my friend."

Which was an unmistakable *see you later, don't worry about it*. Huojin nodded, and made his farewells.

And made a mental note to swing by the clinic again in a day or so. Just in case.

I have a bad feeling about this.

Dawn.

Zuko scrunched his eyes back shut, wrinkling his nose. He hadn't felt less inclined to move

since....

"I'm tired."

Up almost two days straight. Half-drowned following turtle-seals into an impenetrable fortress. Fighting his way past a suddenly master-level waterbender, dragging the Avatar through a collapsing ice sheet and a blizzard, getting buried by said waterbender *again*....

And finally, fighting for his life against a master firebender who utterly, sincerely wanted nothing more than him dead.

Yeah. He'd been tired.

I hurt everywhere.

Not a physical ache. More a trembling exhaustion of energies, as if he'd been clinging to one spar in a typhoon, and had been pulled in just before he slipped under the waves.

Get up. Get moving. Get to sunlight.

Quiet confusion, then *caution*, flickered through his mind. Which was crazy, he was a firebender, he needed the sun-

Lee is Earth Kingdom, and Water. Don't rush. Get there, but don't make it obvious.

A whisper. A nudge. Like the times Uncle's voice seemed to pop up in his head, when he was about to do something *really stupid*. It was *weird*.

Sunlight. Now.

He'd marked the exits from Amaya's clinic automatically, just as he did going into any unknown territory. The street was not an option. But that sliding screen, over there - that seemed promising.

He slid back wood and paper, and breathed in green. *A water garden.*

No turtle-ducks. None of the giant lotuses he'd seen in some nobles' displays. A fair-sized pond, water burbling up at one end with a chuckling clarity that spoke of a source somewhere far below, trickling out the far side into a neat herb garden. Cattails, blooming iris, and yellow water-lilies spread from rocky edges to deep water, and iridescent fish no longer than his little finger ducked under leafy cover.

Molly-guppies. Wild, and some of the fancy breeds.

...How do I know that?

Ba Sing Se, that whisper nudged him again. *You know, like you know where the Rings are. When curfew is. How to get down to the docks without people asking too many questions.*

Lee. That whisper was Lee.

What did she do to me?

Focus. Sit in the strengthening sunlight. *Breathe.*

It was like dropping a lit candle into a gaping chasm. Warm, and welcome... but spirits, he felt so empty.

Firebenders rise with the sun. Be patient. She almost killed you. Just keep breathing.

A few minutes, and Uncle sat down beside him with a happy sigh. "I am feeling a bit chilled myself. Amaya believes it will pass soon."

"I just want to soak. For days." Zuko breathed more deeply, testing the flicker of fire inside him. Still a pale shadow of what it should be, but growing stronger. "It was like everything washed away." Another breath. "Almost everything."

"But you are well?" Uncle's voice was calm, with only shadowy overtones of hunting down a certain waterbender with malice aforethought if he were *not*.

"Coals in a firepot. I just need to dry things out inside...." Zuko grimaced, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm not making sense."

"I believe you are entitled," Iroh said tolerantly. "Dealing with spirits is always unsettling." He paused. "Nephew? You have not looked at me today."

"I'm afraid," Zuko whispered.

"Of what you will see?"

Zuko swallowed. "Of what you will." *Who am I, Uncle? Who?*

"I see my beloved nephew," Iroh said quietly. "Prince Zuko. Son of Ursa, and Fire Lord Ozai. Your eyes cannot change that." Uncle's hand rested on his shoulder. "And I see Lee, whom I have grown to know and rely on through our travels." He chuckled. "But perhaps I am greedy, wanting to have you both."

"How do you always know what to say?" Zuko wondered, feeling the words just as warming as the sun. "I never know what to say."

"Some things come with time." He could hear the smile in Iroh's voice. "Be patient. You are still young."

I don't want to be patient! I want-

That thought seemed to tangle itself up like a pygmy puma kitten in a ball of yarn, hissing and spitting and somehow utterly ridiculous. He might want his honor back, but Lee flung up glimpses of arrogant, uniformed Earth Kingdom generals, who didn't *care* what the Dai Li did so long as they kept order in Ba Sing Se.

It's not like that! I have a reason. A good reason.

The whispers seemed to ripple, confused.

If I don't have my honor, I can't be Father's heir. If I'm not - Azula is.

His people. Oh spirits, the things she'd do to his people. And to the world.

Earth and Water. Stay hidden. Deflect your opponent.

He couldn't argue with that. The chances of Aang defeating the Fire Lord any time soon ranged between slim and none. Meaning it didn't matter if Azula thought she had a lock on the throne. Uncle was right. Right now, he had to focus on staying alive.

Uncle.

He lunged, knowing his target would never expect it.

Strong arms caught him regardless, gently returning his fierce embrace. "Zuko?"

Family. He had to laugh, ruefully, as all the loose pieces inside seemed to fall into place. "I think something went wrong, Uncle. We're supposed to be Earth. Tradition. Enduring." He made himself look into green without flinching. This was *Uncle*. And somehow, that made everything all right. "I think Lee is Water."

Iroh's brows went up, but he smiled back. And if it was a bit wry, Zuko couldn't blame him. "Perhaps that will be to our advantage, nephew. It does us no harm for those around us to see you as foreign. So long as they do not see what you are." He hesitated. "Is it difficult?"

"It's different." Zuko pulled back, just far enough to rub his eyebrow. "It's like a flood washed everything out of your house, and you have to find things, and put them back." He had to look away. "What if I don't do it right?"

"Right?" Iroh asked quietly. "Or the same? I am not as I was, before the siege of Ba Sing Se. It is all right to change, nephew. To grow. So long as you remain rooted in your true self."

"I think I already did," Zuko said quietly. Looked up. "I put you back first."

Green eyes widened. "Nephew?"

"When she struck you down...." Zuko had to stop, and breathe. "If she's doing what Father wants - then I don't want it anymore."

Iroh drew in a startled breath.

"I was ordered to *capture* the Avatar. And I will! Alive. He needs to be stopped. Anyone who can do... what he did to the fleet... he *has* to be stopped." Zuko clenched his fists, trying to still their trembling. *I'm not a traitor.* "But I won't sacrifice my people to do it. And I won't let *her* sacrifice them." *Calm. Just... be calm.* "You're my uncle. I won't let that happen to you again. I *won't.*" *Stay calm. Think.* "I know - I have a hard time with my temper. But I'm going to try. To bank the flame. To *think.*" *She's an obstacle. With a lot more firepower.* "She expects me to attack like a firebender. Straight on, for the kill. If I can go around her, deflect her...." Words failed him, and he shrugged.

"It is a place to start," Iroh nodded, and stood. "Lady Amaya says we have a little time yet, before any patients should arrive. And that we are *quite* unobserved."

Even drained, Zuko's heart leapt. He scrambled to his feet. "We can practice?"

"Gently," Iroh advised. "The chi of water is still disturbing our own."

That was fine. He didn't feel up to much beyond candle-lighting. But still. "We can *practice.*"

Iroh winked, and shifted into stance.

Zuko matched him, half a joyous heartbeat behind.

Breakfast, a few good cups of tea, and one nephew safely ensconced in Amaya's garden with a

healing scroll and orders to soak up sunlight. That tended to, Iroh caught Amaya between patients.
"We must talk."

"You said you were going out to look for work." Amaya's tone was mild, but one dark brow arched in curiosity.

"And I will," Iroh affirmed. "This will not take long, I hope." He frowned. "How much of what you have... shaped, in my nephew, is real?"

"Almost all of it," the healer said simply. "The mask uses pieces of your self, and reshapes them as if they were formed in the Earth Kingdom-"

"My nephew seems convinced Lee is Water Tribe."

Amaya halted in mid-thought. Blinked, and slowly nodded. "I believe that does make sense."

"Does it?"

"I checked some of my scrolls yesterday," the healer informed him. "I was searching for anything that might explain what happened. I didn't find it, but I found something else. Something I'd nearly forgotten." She gave him a sober look. "He was given that scar by someone he trusted."

Iroh winced. Which, he knew, was answer enough.

"It's not directly on one of the chakras, but a blow there, where so many of the body's channels come together, with a massive force of chi behind it... If that wound had been dealt by a waterbender, I would have a patient with no will, no desire to live. An empty shell, who would want - nothing."

Iroh straightened, the dreadful meaning sinking home. "One whose inner fire had been extinguished."

Amaya inclined her head. "Just so."

"So my nephew-"

"Has survived surprisingly well," the healer stated. "You must care for him deeply, for him to have even been able to sip that comfort." She glanced toward the screens blocking off the garden. "He's had years of drought. Whatever happened... I don't know if it was the spirits, or simply being that close to death. The scar is there. But the energies it blocked are beginning to flow again."

"Love, and family, and the ability to adapt," Iroh murmured. Considered all that, and paled.

"I would think this would be a good thing, Mushi," Amaya said with some asperity.

"In any other, I would agree," Iroh admitted. "But this is my nephew. If there is *any* way trouble can find him, it will."

Zuko sighed, and shaded his eyes, as the chi meridians marked on the scroll seemed to swim in his vision. Sunlight might be filling the emptiness inside drop by golden drop, but the rest of him didn't seem inclined to tolerate it as well. Not today.

Looking away from the brightness, he saw a cat-claw of white hanging in blue sky. And tensed.

Yue.

Or La, if he meant to invoke the Moon-spirit formally. Which he *didn't*.

But it was hard to look away.

Grimacing, Zuko set the scroll safely down on the portable writing tray, and walked over to the pond. He needed a distraction.

Then again, reading itself would probably be going fine, if practice hadn't been one long series of distractions.

His movements had been right. One advantage of having had to drill the basics into his very bones. He didn't forget. But the flow of his energies had been - off. Odd.

Amaya says it'll settle. Be patient.

On top of that, something just kept tugging at his concentration. Not Lee. At least, he didn't think it was Lee. Lee was a nudge, a whisper. Whatever was bothering him was more - directional. Like the push of storm winds. The shift of a ship in waves.

Push, and pull.

It was annoying.

He crouched by the water, watching multicolored bodies flicker in and out of the sunlight. Wasn't too different from sitting on a dock, watching sealife circle and dance as the tides lapped at them. No salt, though. Breathing didn't seem quite the same without it.

You lived on dry land until you were thirteen, Zuko growled at himself. You can't actually miss sailing around the world chasing rumors and myths.

No. Not really. But the ship had been predictable. Train, hunt for a myth, deal with a crew that wanted to be there only slightly less than he did. Stable. Sane. No spirits, no Avatar, no bounty on their heads.

Until he'd spied an impossible light at the South Pole, and everything had gone catastrophically downhill from there.

If I'd caught him then, if I'd held him then - we wouldn't be in this mess.

Sighing, Zuko skimmed his fingers across the pond's surface. The past was past. He had to deal with what was, not long to chase an airbender who'd never so much as touched water....

His hand lifted, and a thin arc of water lifted with it.

What the-?

Splashed away and was gone, as a quick roll took him yards away from the pool. It wasn't glowing, and it hadn't been a hand - but there were fish in there. You could never be sure.

Flipping to his feet in a ready stance, Zuko eyed the pond suspiciously, ready to sear it out of existence if he had to. If he even could, with spirits involved.

Nothing. Just the quiet murmur of water.

"Lee?" Amaya stepped quietly into view on the garden path. "I'm breaking for lunch, if you'll join me. How far did you-" She eyed him, and his stance, with bemused worry. "Did something happen?"

"Do you have spirits in your water?" Zuko asked tersely.

"Not to my knowledge." The healer gave him a patient smile. "A little paranoid, are you?"

"Only because things are out to get me."

"You make tea?" Huojin muttered under his breath, too low for the higher-ranking guard with him to hear. Not that Officer Yaozu probably would have noticed, bent on getting a steaming cup before they headed out way too early on evening duty, but better safe than sorry.

They're shuffling guards around all over tonight, Huojin thought. Guess they need some extra security up in the Upper Ring. Wonder what's going on?

Not that it really mattered, so long as it stayed in the Upper Ring. Not his neighborhood, not his problem. Poking around up there was a quick way to bump into the Dai Li, and that was a pleasure he'd just as soon forgo. Unlike tea.

"I do," Mushi smiled at him, gesturing the pair of them to empty seats. "It is one of my life's quieter pleasures." He chuckled. "And here comes one slightly louder."

Huojin raised an eyebrow as Lee walked through the door, feeling a wash of interest and relief. The kid looked frazzled at the edges, short hair sticking up everywhere and ink staining his hands and one sleeve. But that was a heck of a lot better than lying half-drowned on Amaya's futon.

"Well?" Mushi asked.

"...I've got an apprentice's license," Lee admitted, taking out the thin sheaf of papers long enough for Mushi to beam at it, before tucking it back under his robe.

"Ah, very good! Tea?"

Lee gave him a skeptical look. "Steamed leaf juice?"

"How can one of my own family say such a thing?" Shaking his head, Mushi poured Yaozu's tea.

The officer picked it up - then took a second breath, sipping it slowly, and sighed. "This is the best tea in the city!"

"The secret ingredient," Mushi said expansively, "is love."

He walked back toward the back of the shop, as Lee stifled a groan.

Huojin chuckled, remembering too well what it was like to be a proud sixteen. "Don't worry. When you get to be his age, you can embarrass *your* nephews, too."

Lee blinked, and all the color drained from his face.

What'd I-? Oh. "Another child," right. Still. Even if Dad likes your sibling better, why do you look like you'd rather face down a charging dillo-lion?

The shop door slammed open.

"I'm tired of waiting!" The angry teen refugee from the other day, sheathed hook swords glinting in the shop's lights as he pointed toward Lee and Mushi. "These two men are firebenders!"

Oh, hell.

You bastard.

The world seemed to shimmer through a watery haze as Jet unsheathed his swords. Zuko deliberately kept his fists from clenching. No swords, no way he could take on someone quick as Jet with just bare hands - damn trained reflexes. Let his hands even start to close, training would kick in and he'd firebend right there, in reflexive self-defense. Which would get them both killed.

Damn you! We didn't do anything to you. Why?

"I know they're firebenders!" Jet growled. "I saw the old man heating his tea!"

The ferry. Damn it.

"He works in a tea shop," Huojin's fellow guard pointed out dryly.

Right. Stay quiet, Zuko told himself. Let other people talk Jet down. Spirits knew he was in no shape to do it, not after a day spent studying and then answering Amaya's exhaustive questions on what he could and couldn't do for a patient. She'd marked his triage judgment as fairly educated, his knowledge of wound care as decent, and his healing bending as remarkably good for someone working mostly on instinct. He might have been proud of that, if he hadn't been so exhausted.

And twitchy. Definitely twitchy. Ever since the pond. Worse since the sun went down. A lot worse.

Push, and pull.

It was driving him *crazy*.

And Jet wasn't helping. "He's a firebender, I'm telling you!" the rebel insisted.

The officer looked less than impressed, as Huojin rose to back him. "Drop your swords, boy. Nice and easy."

"You'll have to defend yourself," Jet said, grim and smug at once. "Then everyone will know. Go ahead, show them what you can-"

Pushing and pulling and damn it, he couldn't just stand here! *Why couldn't you just leave us alone?*

Porcelain clattered like an earthquake, and three cups' worth of tea suddenly hurled itself at Jet's face.

What the...?

"Firebender?" Huojin drawled in the sudden silence. "Looks more like *teabender* to me."

Please let Uncle keep a straight face, Zuko prayed. "That's my uncle you're calling a firebender. Are you out of your *mind*?"

"I saw-"

"I don't know what you saw. I don't care." Zuko took the last step he needed to near Huojin's incautious, dao-armed associate. "See *this!*"

Pull the blades. Separate. *Move.*

And the fight was on.

Iroh clapped a hand to his forehead as more furnishings fell victim to the duel. Ordinarily, he wouldn't worry about Zuko; rested and ready, his nephew could put most fighters of Jet's level down in less than a minute. Tired as he was, though, with his chi still upset from Amaya's waterbending... this could get tricky.

How in the world did my nephew fling tea?

"Serve the tea pretty hot here, huh?" Huojin muttered, watching for any opening to separate the battling youngsters.

"So we do," Iroh agreed after a moment's shock. *Of course. We can move fire. Tales say dragon's children could even bend lava, and that is fiery earth. Fiery water... well, well.*

And wouldn't that be a most unpleasant surprise, for anyone who trapped his nephew on terrain that should favor waterbenders? He could already see some tactical advantages-

Crash.

...Oh dear. Perhaps it was just as well Zuko was not working here. That *had* been the front door.

Damn. He's better than I thought, Zuko realized, dao locked with Jet's swords. Between that, and exhaustion, and not wanting to *kill* the idiot....

I could be in trouble.

"You must be getting tired of using those swords," Jet taunted. "Why don't you back off and let the old man fry me?"

Because I'm not stupid. Because my uncle is worth ten of you, and a pygmy puma thrown in on top. Because you're so wrapped up in needing to hurt someone you'd go after innocent strangers, if you thought they were Fire Nation.

No wonder Katara hates you.

"Please, son, you're confused!" Iroh called out from the doorway. "You don't know what you're doing!"

No, Uncle. He does. That's the problem.

In more ways than one. This was not going well.

No more kid gloves.

Breathe and *focus* and channel inner fire into a quick burst of speed, pinning one hook-sword down, turn and advance and *strike*-

...I cannot believe he ducked.

At least he'd killed the damn wheat straw.

Someone needs to teach that kid that regular people don't kill their problems, Huojin thought acidly, ignoring Yaozu's sputtering over his *borrowed* swords as he tried to figure out a way to get between two desperate fighters without killing either of them. At least, Lee was desperate. The other refugee was riding such an avalanche of hate and fury, he wouldn't care if someone cut his hands off so long as he could spew his venom.

"You see that?" the troublemaker snarled, balancing on the edge of a well. "The Fire Nation is trying to silence me-"

Grinning suddenly, Huojin dashed back inside.

Let's just hope the owner- yes!

Grabbing what he sought, he ran back out toward the fight. *Think fast, kid. Before someone wonders why a waterbender's not taking advantage of a well.* "Lee!"

Damn, he's behind me, I can't-

"Lee!"

Hot and near and *pulling*-

Spinning, he let his free hand arc out, and *pushed*.

A kettle's worth of hot tea hit Jet with the force of a fireball, blasting him down.

Step in, disarm, finish- no!

Foot still on Jet's wrist, Zuko stopped the dao an inch from the teen's throat.

"Good, hold him there," Huojin said briskly, moving in with iron bindings as Jet wheezed, trying to get his breath back. Left wrist secure, the guard motioned Zuko back, and yanked Jet up enough to catch the teen's bruised wrist behind him in the cuffs. "You're under arrest, young man." Green eyes cut back at Zuko. "Drop the sword. Now."

Breathing hard, Zuko nodded, and laid the blade down. Out of reach of Jet's feet. He'd trained hard to be capable of fighting even when captured. No way was he going to assume the *freedom fighter* hadn't picked up a few tricks.

"Me?" Jet sputtered, dripping. "They're *Fire Nation*!"

"No, we're not!" Zuko let some of the fury and frustration pour into his voice. "You *moron*! You said you wanted a fresh start! Well, so did I! But if it's the only way to get an *idiot* like you to stop *attacking my uncle*... damn it, my mother was from the Great Foggy Swamp!"

Dead silence in the street. He could feel the onlookers staring, aghast.

Tea dragging wild brown hair into a soggy mass, Jet blinked at him. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Do I *look* like I'm *kidding*?"

Jet didn't resist as Huojin hauled him to his feet, face scrunched up in horrified disgust. "You're - you eat *bugs*!"

"You have never had fried silkworms? Deprived child." Iroh gave Jet a stern look. "Lee's mother was far more civilized and honorable than most people I have met anywhere. I will thank you not to insult the memory of my brother's wife."

Foggy Swamp?"

Zuko flung up empty hands, disgusted. "Now do you *see* why we didn't tell you?"

Jet seemed to slump against his bonds. "No wonder you're so sneaky...."

It's working? Zuko glanced at the crowd, looking for traces of disbelief. *I can't believe it's working... uh-oh.*

He didn't need Lee's shiver to recognize the pair of Dai Li walking through the crowd. Even if the uniforms hadn't been a giveaway, the way onlookers melted out of their path would have shouted they were trouble. "Is there a problem?" one said levelly.

"I'll say there's a problem!" The teashop owner jabbed a finger toward Jet. "This young man wrecked my teashop, and assaulted one of my employees!"

"Mistaken identity," Huojin said dryly. "We've got it sorted out now." His voice hardened. "Right?"

"I didn't think-" Jet started.

"You got that right." Huojin gave the Dai Li a professional smile. "Thanks for the assistance. But everything seems to be under control now." He glanced at his fellow officer respectfully. "Right, sir?"

"Boy's getting off easy," the officer grumbled. "Attacking the finest tea-maker in the city!"

"Oh ho ho," Iroh chuckled. "That's very sweet."

Zuko wasn't sure whether to laugh or groan. The Dragon of the West, a tea-maker....

Two leaves in the forest. We're just simple refugees. If Uncle's happy with what he's doing while we're resting - well, don't screw it up.

Zuko tried, very hard, not to glance back at the wreck he and Jet had made of the teashop. ...*Any more than you already have.*

Apparently he hadn't done too badly, because the Dai Li were moving off. Though not without a considering look his way.

Lee. Be Lee.

He leaned on that whisper, and gulped air, without any touch of breath control. Shook a little, like a new recruit, now that the battle-rush was fading. Drew closer to his uncle, who was all a frightened refugee had in the world.

They turned and left, and now he really *did* want to fall down.

Later, Zuko promised himself. And hid a vindictive grin, as the officer reclaimed his dao and started hauling Jet off, abusing his prisoner's ears every step of the way.

"Gentlemen?" Huojin raised a brow at the pair of them. "If you'll step over here a moment, I have few more questions."

"He should get off with a warning, this time," Huojin said in an undertone after they complied. "Which is just as well for all of us. The Dai Li don't usually bother questioning random troublemakers before they *deal* with them, but better safe than sorry." Concern swept off his face, giving way to exasperated anger. "Lee, just what the hell did you think you were doing?"

"He attacked my uncle!" Zuko protested.

"I'm not helpless bare-handed, you know," Iroh said patiently. "I would have been fine-"

"If somebody recognized your form?"

That stopped Uncle cold.

"Damn," Huojin groaned. Looked at Iroh with rueful sympathy. "I hate to say it, but he's got a point. We do get soldiers off the Outer Wall down here. A few of them have been close enough to the action to notice things." Another green-eyed glare Zuko's way. "Still. We were *right there*. Let us handle it. That's what the Guard is for."

Confused, Zuko glanced at Iroh. Who started to speak, stopped, and finally shook his head. "It seems we are both unaware of customs that may prevail in the larger cities of the Earth Kingdom," Iroh said thoughtfully. "If you would be so kind as to inform us how the Guard functions in Ba Sing Se? So we may avoid any other misunderstandings."

"We're like the Guard everywhere, I think," Huojin said wryly. "We enforce the laws. Investigate petty thefts. Keep people from *killing* each other?"

"You do?" Zuko said, even more confused.

This time, it was Huojin who hesitated. Looked at him. Looked back at Iroh. "Is he serious?"

"My nephew is rarely not serious," Iroh said bluntly. "We are not accustomed to such protections being extended to everyone." He paused, choosing his words. "Some might say that those in our unpleasant position do not deserve our lives, if we cannot fight to keep them." He shrugged. "Besides the obvious - I believe I was twenty, when I encountered my first assassin outside the shelter of my clan. Lee... has not had such fortune."

Huojin stared at him. Turned a disbelieving gaze on Zuko.

"What?" Zuko said crossly. The fight was over, he was tired, and no matter how low they kept their voices, there were far too many eyes on them.

And he knew that look on the guard's face. Knew it, and drew in a hiss of breath. "Don't *ever* pity me," he bit out, low and angry. "If I were better, they wouldn't *dare* come." *If I were better. If*

Father loved me. Zhao would never have dared if he'd- if I'd-

Fists clenched, cold, he turned away. "You need anything else?"

"...Let me talk to your uncle for a minute."

Huojin barely waited for Lee to get out of earshot before facing Mushi head on. "Assassins?" he hissed, barely above a whisper. "And what the hell's the *obvious*?"

Mushi gave him a skeptical brow. "I believe you know, if you will think on it."

Agni Kai. Oh. Hell.

Firebenders. Benders who had the right to challenge, or *be* challenged, when two of them went head-to-head. Duels that could be to wounding, or death.

Damn. Never really thought about that. Our people here, they're just people. Most of them never wanted to hurt anyone in their lives. But firebenders... they're trained to kill. All of them.

"Right. Stupid question," Huojin managed, voice unsteady. "But - *assassins*?"

"I told you it was not safe for Lee to remain behind." Mushi weighed him in his gaze, and sighed. "Specifically, because he had just survived an attempt arranged by Admiral Zhao. The man could not be allowed to learn he had failed."

You got drafted as an adviser to the man who tried to kill your nephew. And you snuck him onto the Admiral's own invasion ship, and got away with it. Who are you? "He's sixteen," Huojin protested.

"The war does not care. The spirits do not care. His father does not care." Mushi gave him a sad smile. "Thank you for your assistance. It was most clever, and timely. Now, I think your Officer Yaozu is waiting." He inclined his head. "Do not worry. I will see that Lee rests. He's much more civilized, after a good night's sleep."

Civilized, Huojin thought numbly, heading off to join Yaozu and his sullen prisoner. *Oma and Shu. How could anybody call a land where that happens to kids civilized?*

Only it *didn't* happen to kids, from what he'd heard. Not ordinary ones. Not even ordinary firebenders. Fire Nation politics were vicious, true, but the nobles who earned admiral's rank didn't try to assassinate people who couldn't possibly be a threat-

Oh, Agni. Huojin almost tripped over a cobble left awry after some random earthbender had played with the street. A dozen little facts Mushi had dropped fell into place, and the pattern was something he *should* have seen a mile away. *His brother is unquestionably loyal to the Fire Lord? They're not just nobles. They're great names!*

The highest class in the nation, beyond the royal family itself. Warriors. Firebenders of unparalleled power. And - yes - targets of assassins, when court politics turned nastier than usual. Down to the children.

Meaning the reason Lee acted like he expected people were trying to kill him... was that he expected people to *try to kill him*.

And they're hiding here, in Ba Sing Se. As commoners. They're not just desperate. They're clueless.

Grimacing, Huojin ran through his likely patrol duties in his head. No help for it, he wouldn't be able to drop by the clinic until late. And this wasn't the kind of thing he could tell Amaya in a note.

"Where are you taking me?" Jet growled, defiance back now that Lee and Mushi were out of sight.

"Headquarters," Huojin said loudly, noting the pair of ragged teens slinking through the night crowds after them. "Lucky for you. Let me tell you a little about the Dai Li...."

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

By Inkgirl: I am so freaking sorry for the long delay. It seems to me that real life is actually trying to not give me one free minute. Welp. Okay, just to warn you: I will still try to update as often as possible but it may take its time. Most likely right now is once a week. I hope it gets better soon, but right now, this is sadly one of my minor projects, but as soon as I work the mayor one out, you will get updates more often.
Edit: I actually wanted to post this yesterday, I had a whole hour of work in front of me and then (I have no idea how) half of it got deleted. Half of it means around twenty pages. I safed the rest because I was out of time and am doing the deleted part now.

By Vathara: A/N: To anyone who thinks Zuko's met too many nice people lately... remember first, they don't know who he is. Second, some of these people may be Iroh's White Lotus contacts. Third, people in Ba Sing Se go to great lengths to avoid trouble. (Dai Li for troublemakers, anyone?) And finally, remember Zuko's usual luck. When things *do* go wrong, they're going to go wrong *catastrophically*.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"So." Safely ensconced in their new apartment, Iroh poured hot water into a cup in front of his nephew. No point in wasting good tea on an experiment. "Can you show me again?"

Gentle words, that he hoped sounded casual, instead of carefully chosen. Zuko had fought so hard, so long, to master Sozin's style. To bend fire as others claimed it should be bent. Learning to follow his own instincts and experiment now - it was a delicate, delicate task.

He tried, and failed, so many times. And with Azula, and my brother... it was never safe to fail.

Yet without failure, how can we discover anything new? And this is new. Or, perhaps, very old.

"I'm not sure," Zuko admitted. "I just - got angry." Biting his lip in concentration, he touched steaming water, and slowly lifted his hand.

Thin and sparkling, a strand of water clung to his fingertip.

Holding his breath, Iroh watched.

Water collapsed back into the cup, and Zuko hissed in frustration. Frowned. Held himself still, and deliberately breathed out, slow and easy. Dipped his fingers in a scooping motion, as if gathering a handful of flames.

A globe of water shimmered in his palm, still steaming.

He's done it. Iroh breathed freely again, spirit soaring. "Magnificent."

"It's just a little water, Uncle."

"And an acorn is only a small nut," Iroh smiled. "You have proved it can be done. We will build on that." His smile turned rueful. "Tomorrow. We have both had a busy day."

Zuko tipped the globe back into his cup, staring at his dry palm. "I look like a waterbender."

"It might be best not to do that in front of the Fire Sages, true," Iroh admitted. Both the Fire Lord and the Fire Lord's heir were children of *fire*. No other element would suffice. "But I doubt any of them are here. And think, nephew. Now, if you carry a waterskin, you can bend anywhere in Ba Sing Se. *Without* betraying yourself." He chuckled. "And as to that - you told our story *perfectly*."

Zuko reddened, and ducked his head. "I didn't think it would work."

"Under other circumstances, it likely would not have," Iroh said bluntly. "You are a very poor liar, Prince Zuko. Which is nothing to be ashamed of." It was inconvenient, yes. Nearly fatal, given the viper-scorpion's nest Azulon and Ozai had made of the court and the military. But not shameful. "You were angry and upset, and clearly worried for my life. And those about us had every reason to wish Jet wrong, and these walls safe from even the thought of the Fire Nation."

"You mean, I didn't fool them," Zuko said grimly.

"But you did choose the right words, to allow them to fool themselves," Iroh said with great satisfaction. "It was well done." He laughed again, softly. "But take pity on your poor, elderly uncle, and do not scare me that way again."

Standing, Zuko snorted at *poor* and *elderly*. But gave him a faint, tentative smile. "I'll try."

"Ah." Iroh's eyes danced. "So you mean to find some entirely new way to terrify your uncle to death?"

"Uncle Iroh!" Zuko sputtered.

Chuckling, Iroh stood, and opened his arms.

And almost immediately regretted it, as Zuko froze in place. *Too much, too soon*, Iroh berated himself. *He is tired, but not as unbalanced toward water as he was this morning. I cannot expect-*

Gingerly, Zuko met him halfway, and hugged him back.

Felling the body in his arms tremble, Iroh frowned. "What is wrong?"

"It hurts. Inside."

Iroh stiffened. "I never intended-"

"Don't. Don't let go."

Interesting. And given what Amaya had told him, of the wound to his nephew's spirit.... Iroh held on. Firmly, but not so tight Zuko could not pull free, if he wished. "If it hurts, do not take more than you can bear."

"It's a good pain." Zuko's voice was low, just above a whisper. "Like stretching a scar." A few more moments, and he had to retreat. "I'm sorry, I'm trying...."

"No more than you can bear," Iroh said firmly. Gripped his nephew's shoulder. "I can wait. I trust you. And I know you care."

Green eyes glinted at him, fierce as gold. "I'm not going to give up, Uncle."

"I know you will not," Iroh nodded. *Which is part of what worries me.*

One step at a time, the retired general reminded himself, preparing for bed. *We are here, fed, housed, and relatively safe. And I will be more careful with my bending.*

No need to force Zuko to break his word, after all. He only needed to delay the pursuit, until summer was over. Which should be easy enough. The Avatar had a flying bison, and aid from hopeful people throughout the Earth Kingdom. Surely, now that he had found young Toph, he could hide among the mountains no Fire Nation troops would have reason to venture up, and safely learn earthbending. Why should any of them come to a city bearing the focus of Fire Nation assaults?

Outside his window, Iroh glimpsed the moon.

...Why do I even ask?

Moonlight itched at him, and Zuko buried his head in his pillow. Pushing and pulling and damn it, he *knew* there wasn't a drop of hot water left in the apartment! Why couldn't he sleep?

I need some air.

Pulling on a robe, Zuko slipped out the window and climbed up to the tiled roof. The moon danced in and out of spring clouds, shadows turning footing uncertain. But he was used to that.

The wind is worth it.

He'd always loved the wind, even though Fire Nation ships didn't need it. The wind told you about places you'd never been, lands you might never see. If you knew how to listen.

Leaning on the roof cistern, Zuko closed his eyes.

Murmurs of people, faded by distance. Music somewhere west of here; no tsungi horns, and the rhythm was different, but it was definitely supposed to be music. A drift of green and earthy scents grown too familiar over the past month; farms, inside the Outer Wall.

You'd never know there was a war out there.

Wind shifted, bringing faint cries of lake-gulls chasing schools of fish in the moonlight. Something tickled his hand, and Zuko snatched-

And blinked. *Bison fur.*

A few, thin strands. Not freshly shed, if the past few months had taught him anything. Spring fur, not winter - though length was a little hard to judge. Half the strands had been melted back, tips charred from white to smoke-brown.

You idiot.

He couldn't think. He couldn't breathe.

I warned you. I told you! She does what Father asks - she does everything perfectly, even if it means killing....

No.

Kneeling, Zuko pressed his head against the night-cool ceramic of the cistern, forcing panicked

thoughts into rough order. No. The Avatar couldn't be dead. Not just because he desperately needed Aang to be alive. Because if the Avatar were dead, Fire Lord Ozai would have announced the Fire Nation's triumph to the skies.

And Ba Sing Se would be falling, even now.

Which obviously wasn't happening. So the Avatar was alive. He had to believe that.

Panic receding, Zuko let out a slow breath, and braced his hands on top of the cistern to stand again. *Don't scare me like that again, Aang.*

Aang. He'd thought of the Avatar as *Aang*.

And he could feel the water under his hands, separated from him only by thick, fire-hardened earth. No fluttering almost-heartbeat of fire, like the steaming brew in Uncle's teapot. Just pushing, and pulling. Waiting. Aching at him.

Trying not to think, Zuko swept an arm out, hand open.

Like the moon, like the tides; like Katara facing me, angry and lethal as a host of blades....

Pulled it back.

Water erupted.

Reflexes seized hold even through shock; he skipped back, feet not even damp. Water curled on itself, following-

Stop!

The wave halted, rippling in time to his trembling, out-flung hand.

...I can feel it.

Not a warmth; not a heartbeat. Not like fire. This was the flow of blood in his veins, the ripple of a stream over his fingers. The heady rush of turning a ship into the teeth of a storm, knowing it'd take everything he had to survive - and knowing he *could*.

The ache inside was easing, and that was the most frightening thing of all. Other benders might be too young to remember. He hadn't been.

Eight, and there was something I needed, and I couldn't - I couldn't figure it out. It was like being hungry and thirsty and drowning, and I couldn't get air. And I wasn't cold, but it was like cold, I had to get close to the fire, I needed it....

He'd needed fire then. Like he'd needed water now.

Terrified, he snapped his left hand out, fire blazing to life in his palm even as the wave collapsed.

Oh yeah. Real smart. Idiot!

He snuffed it, relieved despite his mortification at breaking cover. Whatever was wrong with him, his firebending was still intact.

It doesn't feel wrong. Just - like bending.

Crouching, Zuko ran a hand over wet tiles, fingertips not quite touching the roof.

Water beaded up in the moonlight, and followed.

Oh, Agni.

He should be panicking. He knew it. But rage and panic and fear for Uncle's life had seared through him so many times the past few days... there just wasn't anything left. All he felt was numb.

I can never go home again.

Oh, but it was worse than that. So very much worse.

"So this is your answer," Zuko whispered to the spirit shining overhead. "The Fire Nation destroyed the Air Nomads, and now you'll destroy us." A tear slipped down his cheek; he wiped it away. "That's what's going to happen. My father only has two heirs. And Azula's insane." Another tear; he let it fall. "When he dies, she'll inherit. And I know what she'll do. You think the war is bad now? Just wait.

"And if she doesn't inherit-" Zuko swallowed hard. "Firebenders are loyal. We *need* it. If there's no Fire Lord, my people will tear each other apart. We won't be able to stop. And once our defenses are down, once we're at each others' throats in a civil war..." He could see it, clear as daybreak. Water Tribe ships sailing into the Fire Nation's deepest harbors. Ramps falling, unleashing earthbenders in a roar of steel and stone.

Zuko's fists clenched, and he stared up at the moon through a veil of tears. "Great plan." And he bowed, formally, vanquished to victor.

Then straightened, and glared defiance back at silver. "But we're not Air Nomads. We'll fight. We'll *live*." He swallowed tears. "I'm going to save them. As many as I can."

I'm going to learn what Amaya does. All of it. And then-

And then, what? Hide frightened refugees all through the Earth Kingdom? They'd be found. Hunted down. Killed.

I don't know yet. Jaw set, Zuko climbed back down off the roof. *But I'll think of something.*

Lu Ten says I give spirits a headache. Agni, I hope he's right.

"You are ridiculously awake for this hour of morning," Amaya murmured, downing the last of her tea. And almost immediately wished she could take the words back. If Huojin was right, and she'd never had reason to doubt him yet, Lee might not know her gentle teasing for what it was.

Like a Northern chieftain's son, trying to pass as a simple Southern tribesman. It's a wonder he's managed to stay unnoticed this long.

No. Not a wonder, not given what she'd seen of Lee so far. Pure, unrelenting effort, fueled by intelligence, tenacity, and the burning desire to *live* that marked the best of her charges.

"Firebenders rise with the sun," Lee said, studying the scroll she'd lent him as if he hadn't noticed the snap in her voice. "Polar summers are hell. No one can sleep. Polar winters - there's good

reasons not to go that way."

Amaya tried not to let herself react, storing those facts away. *You've been to the poles. More than once. And you're usually surrounded by firebenders. What have you been doing?*

She shouldn't want to know. She'd made it a habit, not to know about people before they came to her. But none of them had been benders.

I want to know. You've done something impossible. How?

He glanced at her warily. "I didn't think waterbenders needed to be up nights."

Hmm. You're curious too. "We don't," Amaya allowed. "I prefer to work a later day for my clients, who often must be working from dawn to twilight, with irregular times off. And for myself. I may be a master healer, but I am not the strongest waterbender by far. I take advantage of the moon, when I can, for more difficult healing."

Some of the tension eased out of Lee's shoulders. "Work around your weak points. I know."

Amaya frowned. "Your uncle thinks well of your skill."

"He's good. I'm - nowhere close." Lee didn't look up, voice quiet and steady. Not angry, as she would have expected from a young man his age, much less a young *firebender*. Barely even a whisper of resignation, buried in the smooth flow of *fact*.

We'll have to work on that.

"So if you're not usually up this early, why are you?" Now Lee glanced up, lone brow raised.

Blunt, but not suspicious. Maybe his reflexes weren't quite as hair-trigger as Huojin feared. "I need to make a house call," Amaya answered. "And I don't want them to see me coming."

...And perhaps Huojin was right after all, and a warrior's trained suspicions were merely held under iron control. Uncanny green fixed on her. Not the familiar leaf-green of blue on Fire Nation amber. A fierce, emerald blaze, eerie as the flames in the Earth King's palace. "You're expecting trouble," Lee said levelly.

Amaya caught her breath, and shook her head. "I'm not certain what I'm expecting." *What is it about this boy? I faced down young Arnook, when I wasn't much older than he is now. And we all knew he was raised to be Chief someday.*

Chief, yes. A leader of men in war, certainly; though they all hoped the Fire Nation had learned their lesson decades ago, and would never return. But Lee was more than that.

Fire is the element of power.

Even soaked in water's shadows, Lee *burned*.

"What's the situation?" the young man asked, impatience leaking into his voice.

"I would prefer not to tell you," Amaya said plainly. Raised a dark brow, before he could open his mouth. "Something is going on, and I have not been able to determine what. It could simply be a series of accidents. But there have been so many, these past months." She paused, deliberately. "It could be malice. Everything I know from my training, everything I know about these people, says that it can't be. But I could be wrong." She tapped a finger gently on the table. "I would like a pair

of fresh eyes. In case friendship has clouded my judgment. Do you need to know more?"

He reddened a little, and ducked his head. "No, Master Amaya."

Amaya smiled quietly. Teenager, with the arrogance of the nobly born engrained into his bones... but Mushi had at least taught him manners. "Madam Meixiang is one of your people. She's married to Professor Tingzhe Wen, earthbender, archaeologist, and historian with Ba Sing Se University-"

"Does he *know*?" Lee caught her look, and glanced away. "...Sorry."

It was a reasonable question. "He knows," Amaya nodded. "Not that he cares. I don't think Tingzhe pays attention to anything that happened after Avatar Kyoshi died. Meixiang has to remind him when the children's birthdays are." She chuckled, shaking her head at one memory. "When Jinhai was born, Tingzhe's students had to drag him out of the rare scrolls section of the library! He was tracking down this piece of Fire Nation correspondence from someone *else* who'd been researching the Avatar. Spirits only know why. I'd thought the Fire Nation worried about living Avatars, not dead ones."

No reaction. Not so much as a twitch. In fact, it was such a careful *non*-reaction, she was startled.

What's that about?

"They have children?" Lee asked warily.

"Four," Amaya said, rising. *I have so much I want to ask you. I wish it didn't have to wait.* "They don't know their mother's history. It's safer. The rest, I'll tell you on the way."

Nice house, Zuko thought, mentally comparing it to other Earth Kingdom dwellings he'd seen. Not palatial, by any stretch of the imagination. Not even really big. But the Middle Ring definitely had the Lower beat when it came to quiet style. "Why don't you live up here?"

"Most of those who need me will never leave the Lower Ring," Amaya said quietly. "If Meixiang didn't love Tingzhe, I doubt she would have left. It's hard for your relatives, trying to fit in." Blue eyes regarded him. "Are you faring well?"

I'm wanted for dereliction of duty and treason. My sister wants me dead. And the spirits have made it so the whole Fire Nation will want me dead. How do you think I'm doing? "I'll be fine," Zuko forced out. "I still have Uncle, and...."

I'm a waterbender. Despair opened up like a black pit, hungry to swallow him. *I don't have anyone.*

...No. He clung to hope, the way Uncle would have wanted him to, even when caring cut him to the bone. *He said he didn't hate me. Even after he thinks - after Mom-*

He's Uncle. He's not going to turn me away. He won't.

If he could only be *sure*.

"I still have Uncle," Zuko repeated quietly. "I guess - most of the people who make it here aren't that lucky."

"Some aren't, no." Amaya frowned at him a moment longer, considering something. Shook it away, and beckoned him to follow as she knocked on the front door.

"Amaya?" A middle-aged woman, impeccably dressed despite the early hour. "Oh, I'm glad you're here... why are you here?"

"I'd like you to meet my new apprentice, Lee," Amaya said briskly. "Who's hurt?"

"Suyin," Meixiang answered, stepping aside so they could enter. "It was her turn to make breakfast. I've warned her to be careful, she's just at that awkward age...."

Zuko listened with half an ear, looking for anything out of place. Not that he'd know what was out of place in an Earth Kingdom professor's house. Something he'd reminded Amaya of on the way over.

But she'd asked. He had to try.

Suyin's the younger daughter, he recalled from Amaya's briefing. Thirteen, not a bender. The older sister, Jia, is a good bender, but tries to hide it - it's not ladylike here. Mostly her father trains her. She's in and out because she's a student at the university, along with her older brother, Min. He's sixteen, he is getting official training, and that's something Amaya's worried about. The Army would be one thing, but if the Dai Li want him as a recruit...he's mentioned it a few times, and the family's not handling it well.

And then there was Jinhai. Granted, he didn't know anything about normal families, but he remembered time he'd spent with Lu Ten. Teenagers and a six-year-old weren't always a good mix-

Zuko frowned, leaning closer to the painted screen half-folded by the entryway, blocking direct view of the stone stairs to the second floor. Were those spark-holes, half-hidden in the black of cat-owl feathers?

Pretty far from the kitchen for sparks. Even if they were using a hearth instead of that stove.

Yet his questing fingers came away with specks of soot, far below the height anyone would carry a candle.

Any adult, Zuko reminded himself. When you were six, you had to carry a candle. Which had been humiliating as hell, for one born of Sozin's line. He'd learned to get around without them whenever possible. He'd practiced sneaking through the dark, ever since-

Jinhai is six.

Suyin got burned.

Sparks where there shouldn't be.

No. Couldn't be. This was an earthbender's family.

Eyes narrowed, Zuko started searching.

"What are you looking for?"

Suyin, arm healed but dark green eyes wary as her mother and Amaya talked, Meixiang rescuing the breakfast rice from scorching. Young as she was, Suyin still gave him a *considering* look that oddly reminded him of Lieutenant Jee after the storm.

"I'll know it when I see it," Zuko said levelly, crouching to view the house from more of a six-year-old's height. *I just hope I don't see it.*

There. A patch of wall slightly paler than the rest. One regular, rectangular stripe, as if the scroll painting beside it had been moved just a little over....

Lifting painted paper aside, he stared at small, blackened fingerprints.

Damn.

"If you don't know what you're looking for, how will you know if you find it?" Suyin smiled bravely, hand on his arm. "Have you had anything to eat yet? We've got some great peanut sauce-"

"Suyin," Zuko said quietly, "where's Jinhai?"

She recovered well, he'd give her that. "Just here, a few minutes ago - he's always a pest in the kitchen, he knows he's supposed to wait until the meal's ready...." She looked into his eyes, and swallowed hard.

"He was there," Zuko went on, still quiet. "When you were burned."

"I - got distracted." She faced him squarely, a mother turtle-duck in front of her brood. "It was an accident."

You know. And if she knew about her brother, what didn't she know? "Accidents can get worse, if someone doesn't know what they're doing," Zuko said plainly. Kept his hands from trembling by an effort of will. *The more people who know, the more danger we're in. But these are my people. Even if they don't know it.* "Suyin. I can help."

Suyin sucked in a startled breath, and her mother's attention jerked toward them. "What's going on?" Meixiang asked.

"I would like to know that as well," Amaya said evenly. "Lee?"

"Master Amaya." Zuko didn't try to soften the grim look on his face. "We have a problem."

"Where is he?" rang down the stairs. Young, male, and ticked off.

An unintelligible groan echoed down to them. Jia, Zuko guessed, from the half-heard maledictions on idiot older brothers who didn't know when to keep their voices down.

"Don't cover for him, Jia! Not for this!" Half-shaved, university uniform thrown on, Min brandished a ribbon-tied sheaf of scrawled-on paper, now liberally splashed with fresh ink. Stones cracked under his feet as he stomped downstairs, sliding askew. "My class notes! Do you know how long it's going to take to rewrite these?"

Do you know how long it's going to take to put those steps back to rights? Zuko thought wryly, hand against his waterskin to warm it. Facing an upset earthbender without firebending *and* without his dao was *not* on his list of fun things to do today.

"Min, the stairs!" Meixiang said sharply.

"Slag the stairs! He does not get out of it this time-" Min stopped short, finally getting a good look at Zuko's face. "Who are *you*?"

"I'm with her," Zuko said levelly, nodding toward Amaya as he took in the temper, the way upheaved stones were tilted at odd angles instead of directional, and the lack of balanced stance. *Trained, but not experienced. Just keep calm, and keep your head.* He turned back to Suyin. "He's

probably scared too. I know what that's like." *Twice over. Somebody really hates me.*

Suyin paled a little, but nodded. "What are you going to do?"

Zuko tried to smile. It probably wasn't reassuring. "First, we get the accidents to stop."

"Accidents?" Min's eyes narrowed, and he stomped toward the kitchen, a wave of one hand yanking up the trapdoor that led down to the root cellar. "All right, brat. No more nice big brother."

You're going to corner a- Oh, you idiot!

Zuko moved, quick enough to catch the trapdoor before it fell back into place. The thin layer of stone on top of wood yanked down with more than its own weight; apparently Min didn't want to be *interrupted*.

Exhale, and *push*.

Stone and wood shattered.

...Oops.

He leapt through the opening down the stairs, in time to see Min yank a tearstained, brown-haired boy out from behind pottery jars of rice.

"Let me go!" Jinhai squirmed, twisting his arm around. "I didn't mean to! I'm *sorry!*"

"Hiding's not going to do you any good," Min said grimly. Gripped the collar of the boy's robe, and gave it a tooth-rattling shake. "I'm going to do what Dad should have done weeks ago."

No!

Jinhai flung up hands in front of his face, and sparks flew.

Landing on the cellar floor in a crouch, Zuko swept his hands out to deflect, then pushed flattened palms *down*.

Every spark winked out.

Min had dropped the boy, and was backing away from him with a look of pure horror. "You - you're-"

Looking up at his older brother, Jinhai crumbled into fresh tears.

"Jerk," Zuko ground out. Stepped around Min in one fluid motion, and caught Jinhai before he could scramble away. "It's okay. Shh." He held on tight, rubbing the boy's shaking back. The way Ursa had, years ago. "Just breathe. It's going to be all right."

"Who're you?" Jinhai sniffled.

"I'm Lee," Zuko answered. "Amaya's apprentice. Let's go talk to your Mom, okay? I'm sure she wants to know everyone's all right."

"All right?" Min sputtered. "He's a- a-"

"Firebender," Suyin said bluntly. "Took you long enough to figure it out."

"You *knew*?"

Leaving his apparently capable ally behind to distract Min, Zuko carried Jinhai upstairs and handed him off to a pale Meixiang. With difficulty. The boy did *not* seem to want to let go. "He's not hurt," Zuko reported. "But he needs to learn control. Or people are going to see things Suyin can't cover up."

Jinhai buried his face in his mother's robes. "I didn't *mean* to."

"I know, sweetheart," Meixiang said quietly. "You haven't done anything wrong. Mommy's just... surprised." She looked between Zuko and Amaya. "He's six!"

"It happens, sometimes," Zuko shrugged. And bit back, *I was eight*. Prince Zuko's late firebending was still afloat in the currents of vicious noble gossip, even if it wasn't nearly as juicy as his scar. No point leaving clues around for Azula.

"How the *hell* did it happen at all?" Min stalked up the basement stairs, Suyin rolling her eyes in his wake.

"Min Wen, you watch your language!" Meixiang ordered. "That sort of thing may be passable among the young idiots at the university, but it is *not* proper in this house!"

"...Sorry, Mom." Min only looked abashed for a moment. "But how? We're citizens of Ba Sing Se! Dad's an *earthbender*!"

"And Mom's a refugee from the war," Suyin said bluntly. "Figure it out, Min."

Meixiang stared at her daughter. "You know?"

"Jia helped me put it together," Suyin said shyly. "You don't talk about outside much, and when you do, you always say you were from far away. You know a *lot* of people who look like Lee. And once things started happening around Jinhai...." She shrugged.

"But you can't be," Min said, stunned. "Not one of *them*."

"Good people are where you find them, Min," Amaya said calmly. "No matter what their nation. Or their element." She turned a considering look on Zuko. "You can teach him?"

"It'll take some time. Putting fires out is trickier than starting them," Zuko said honestly. "Yes. I can."

Jinhai lifted his head from his mother's embrace, just enough to give him a wide-eyed stare. "*You* put it out!"

"Yes, he did," Amaya smiled. Turned a serious look on Meixiang. "You should talk to your husband, and tell me what you decide. Lee is my apprentice. If he needs to train someone else as well, we'll have to work out a schedule."

"What's a *firebender* going to learn from a waterbender?" Min said sourly.

You've never fought another element, have you? Spirits, I hope someone trains you before you do. Or you'll be toast. "Healing," Zuko said flatly. "We don't all want to kill people. Firebenders make glass. Forge steel. They do all kinds of things that *aren't* the war." *Though the Fire Lord's orders have taken a lot of people away from even that.*

It wasn't right. It was his father's will, but - it was wrong, that other nations didn't know anything of firebenders but killing.

Min pressed his palms to his forehead, as if to hold in a splitting headache. "This is *crazy*."

Zuko hid a smirk. *Welcome to my life.*

Shutting the clinic door, Lee leaned his head against the wood, just for a moment. Sighed soundlessly, and straightened. "Is that it?"

Level voice. Ready stance. You'd never know he's had a day that would work most young men into the ground. Amaya studied her apprentice. And I don't think it's an act. He doesn't hoard his strength, no - but he spends it judiciously. Carefully. Enough to see the job done, and keep moving.

Mushi said he wasn't a soldier. But Lee had the same steely discipline she'd seen in the best earthbenders off the Outer Wall.

And something more. She narrowed her eyes, trying to pin it down. They're part of a unit. Always sure someone will be there for backup. To rescue them... or at least, avenge them. Lee's not like that.

For Lee, there is no backup.

She could still see that arc of flame snapping toward her, searing orange, before Mushi had shoved it aside in smoke and rippling hot air. But she couldn't hold onto the anger anymore. Not after he'd given her everything she asked for, all day, with people who even got on her nerves, biting back what probably would have been scathing comments as professionally as a soldier on a grim but necessary detail. Not after she'd seen him with Jinhai.

I still want to know how he broke that trapdoor. He didn't bend anything. Did he?

"There is one more thing I need your assistance with." Amaya pointed toward one of the waiting chairs. "Sit down."

"Why?" Lee asked warily, complying.

"I want to examine your eye."

Ah. White knuckles, carefully hidden up his sleeves. "It's a *scar*. You can't *heal* that."

Which was as close as he'd come to telling her to *go to hell* all day. *So there is a teenage boy in there*, Amaya thought, wryly amused. *I was beginning to wonder.* "The surface, no. You'll always carry that mark. But underneath it - the body tries to heal for years. Something should still be willing to bend." She gave him a frank look. "Huojin says you are skilled with the dao. He doesn't have to tell me what a wound like that likely did to your peripheral vision. Let me see if I can do anything about that."

"...What do you need me to do?"

"Sit still, and keep your eye closed. This will prickle a bit." Hand sheathed in water, Amaya touched her fingers to ridged flesh and held them still. Waiting. Fresh wounds were obvious, a swamp-muck of disruption in the body's chi that dragged at her like quicksand. Scars were more subtle. A fine grit of sand, washing under her fingertips.

There you are.

She'd never be one of the great healers; never close a mortal wound with her patient on the brink of death. But scars didn't ask for power. They asked for skill, and patience.

Bit by tiny bit, she picked at still-healing tissues, willing them to draw strength and become whole. Drove her concentration deeper, into the blood, and dug at the under-layer of the scar itself.

Sometimes you must break, in order to mend.

Delicate work. And likely more painful than a prickle. But her patient made no sound.

Leave it there.

Amaya drew her energy away from his blood, back into healing water. Passed her hand slowly over the scar, feeling grit drag at her chi as she healed the flesh anew. Held her fingers still, searching, and nodded. "That should do for tonight."

"For tonight?" Lee blinked at her as she let water glide back into a basin. "You plan to do this again."

"For at least a week. Two would be better. Slow and patient; that's the best way to handle old wounds. Remember that. No, stay there," Amaya added, before he could rise. "Sight feeds into your balance. Give yourself a little time to adjust." She gave him a patient smile. "Perhaps you could tell me exactly what you did to Meixiang's cellar door?"

"Oh." Lee reddened. "I overdid it."

"The shards of stone were a clue," Amaya said wryly. "What did you do?"

"Breathed," Lee said, deadpan. Took in her raised brow, and shifted his shoulders. "Instead of pushing it out as fire, you keep it inside. It's a little more strength, a little more speed." Another half-shrug. "It's not a big deal."

"You broke the door," Amaya pointed out.

Red deepened. "Should have known it wouldn't be as tough as iron," Lee said, eyes down. "You should see Uncle. He can just *shove*, gentle as a kitten-owlet pat - and they stop skidding forty feet away."

Amaya stared.

Still looking at the floor, Lee missed it. "I try not to use it too much. You don't want to depend on it. Never know when someone might take your bending away."

"Might *what*?" Amaya started, aghast. "Bending is a gift from the spirits!"

"Which you can't use if you can't move your chi." Lee was looking at her now, confused. "Aren't there special enforcers in Ba Sing Se? People who know how to block chi?"

"If there were, I hope I would know about it," Amaya stated, feeling faint. "Someone can take your bending away? Forever?"

Lee shook his head. "Only for a few hours. Depends on how hard they hit you."

Amaya felt ill. "And you've seen this happen."

"You could say that," Lee muttered. Hand almost touching one of the key chi meridians on his side, before he forced it back down to grip his chair.

Don't react, Amaya told herself forcefully. *There could still be a reasonable explanation*. "Can you describe the symptoms? I'd like to know what to look for."

"Okay...."

"Lady Amaya?" Iroh set a cup of tea down before the healer trembling in his kitchen chair. "It is a bit late for Lee to be out shopping, no matter how much I do appreciate your offer to split a roast duck."

"Curfew's not for hours yet. And that license gives him the right to be out even after it, so long as he's off to a patient or heading home." Amaya cradled the cup in her hands, as if chilled. "Mushi... your nephew was sabotaged."

Mid-sip, Iroh halted. Deliberately set his cup down. "Please explain."

"I can't believe - spirits, if *that's* the child your brother wants as heir, what is *wrong* with the man, he deserves to be flung overboard to the leopard-sharks...." Amaya stopped, and deliberately breathed out anger as a wisp of chill. "Lee's sister. She has a friend who knows this... chi-blocking?"

Ty Lee. "I know the girl you speak of, yes."

"She made this girl *practice* on Lee."

If porcelain had been in his hand, he would have shattered it.

"The odd thing is, he doesn't blame the girl at all," Amaya said softly. "His sister asked her to, called it *necessary training*, and she had to do it. Even if she didn't want to." Blue eyes beseeched him, desperate for it not to be true.

Iroh winced. "That would be so, yes. The girl could not have refused her... requests. Not without dire consequences. And this girl has six sisters to think of, all of whom would have been in peril." He forced down the anger. "How often? For how long?" *How much damage did she do, that I had no chance to see?*

"What kind of *consequences*, Mushi?" Amaya demanded. "What reason in the world could be enough for you *and* Lee to think it doesn't matter that she hurt him?"

"It matters," Iroh said bluntly. "It matters a great deal. But Lee would never have wished the girl's sisters to die for her defiance."

Pale, Amaya fell back in her chair. "Die." She swallowed. "Lee's sister could-"

"Kill them?" Iroh finished. "All of them? Yes. She could. She has done such things." Even traveling the world, he'd kept up on news of the royal family. His Army contacts might have cringed to pass along word of Azula's actions, but they respected him enough to tell the truth. And frankly, burning down a guard for disrespect on the very steps of the palace wasn't something that could be kept quiet. "Tell me what you mean by sabotage. Lee's sister would not have had him blocked during his training. She is far too cunning for that," he finished, half to himself.

"Not... during his official training." Amaya kept her voice quiet, even if it shook with tears. "She'd - arrange for it to happen afterwards. Not all the time. But often enough he mentioned techniques he *avoids* using, because if your bending is cut off in the middle of them...." Dark fingers curled on the table, tightening into unpracticed fists. "She *tortured* him, Mushi. Her own *brother*." Blue eyes glistened, angry and aching with disappointment. "And you're not even *surprised*."

Iroh bowed his head, accepting the rebuke. And the guilt. "I can only say that, like my brother, she is very clever at disguising the true nature of her actions," he said quietly. "I left a shy, happy boy of eight, who was just learning to bend, and was sure his father would finally come to love him. I returned to find Lee's mother gone, his sister all but acknowledged as the true heir, and Lee himself an angry eleven-year-old whose skill was...." He couldn't say it.

"Sabotaged." Amaya gripped her cup, horrified disbelief etched on her face. "How could his father let-?"

"I doubt he knew," Iroh said dryly. "My brother preferred her, yes, but to have Lee such a disgrace in skill? No. He would not permit that." He chuckled bitterly under his breath. "It explains many things. Why Lee improved so greatly after we left, for one." *And why he has fought so hard to gain skill in moving unseen.*

"You honestly believe a six-year-old girl could *plan* this?"

"Plot a course of action that would see her confirmed as heir, and Lee discarded?" Iroh said coldly. "I do. We are skilled at long-term strategies. It is in our blood. From letters Lee's mother sent me, she made this girl and her companion friends within weeks of first meeting her at school. And believe me, Lee's sister sees no need to make *friends*." He frowned, looking back on memory. "Though she could not have acted directly until Lee was nine. The girls of that family are not taught chi-blocks potent enough to stop a firebender until they are at least seven."

"And you're not even surprised." Anguish wracked Amaya's voice. "Tui and La, *why* didn't you take the boy and-" She cut herself off, hand pressed to her lips to hold back horror.

"Take a loyal firebender from his father?" Iroh said quietly. "Would that I could have." He sighed. "If I had believed we would survive the flight - yes, I should have drugged Lee years ago, and disappeared. But we would have been hunted, to the very ends of the earth. I chose a slower path. And I will not regret that. Choosing to heal instead of wage war - Lee's father would never approve. He *knows* that. Yet he has chosen to study with you. And that is the most hopeful sign I have had in some time." Iroh folded his hands before him, regarding her gravely. "There is a secret few know, Lady Amaya. But I believe you will use it wisely. To *break* one's loyalty, suddenly - that is fatal. But to wear at it, slowly, and nurture another, fiercer loyalty in its place... that can be survived. Even by a firebender."

The healer sat up straight, absorbing that. "You know this."

"I do," Iroh nodded.

"You said you were loyal to Azulon."

"I was," Iroh allowed. "Until I found myself forced to choose between the Fire Lord's orders, and the lives of the men under my command." He chuckled ruefully. "I admit, it surprised me. I had not realized how deeply we were bound to each other." He shrugged. "I was fortunate. Someone realized I was ill, and why. And did not betray me." Only later had he learned what considerable skill at Pai Sho his aide Tushirou had been hiding.

"Lee doesn't know." It was not a question.

"No," Iroh admitted quietly. "Do not tell him. Lee's choice is more difficult than it is safe for you to know. If we are fortunate, circumstances will work in our favor."

"Your nephew doesn't seem to believe in luck," Amaya pointed out.

"If fate serves us so ill, then he must make his choice because it is *right*," Iroh said heavily. "I will do all I can, to see he survives it." He favored her with a conspiratorial smile. "Though whatever you might do to give him ties to this life, instead of that which we left behind, would only help."

"You may be surprised." Some of the color had come back to her face, along with a glint of wicked humor. "He seems to be handling that on his own."

"Oh?" Iroh raised a curious brow.

A knock at the door. "I'm home," Zuko's voice filtered through, before he opened the door. Stepped through, wrapped meat in hand, and looked at them both. "Is something wrong?"

"Not at all." Amaya smiled, accepting her half of the duck. "I was just telling your uncle you should have a talk about Jinhai. Good night."

"Jinhai?" Iroh asked, once she was gone.

"Jinhai Wen," Zuko sighed, adding the duck to already-simmering rice and vegetables. "His father's a professor at Ba Sing Se University. And an earthbender. So are his older brother and one of his sisters. His mother's one of us."

Us. Iroh smiled as he poured more tea to go with dinner. *You have always been loyal to your people.* "And?"

Zuko gave him a half-smirk. "Jinhai's six. And he gets up at dawn."

He didn't quite spill his nephew's tea. But perhaps he did set the teapot down a bit hastily. "A firebender? Born in Ba Sing Se?"

"I can teach him to put fires out," Zuko said quietly. "They saw me stop him from burning his brother by accident, they *know* about me. They don't know about you." He set his jaw. "But I don't know if that's fair to Jinhai."

"You will be fine," Iroh said firmly. "You have a thorough grasp of your basics. Give him a firm foundation, and all else will follow." He smiled. "So my student will become a teacher. I am pleased." He had to sigh. "And worried. An earthbender, or a waterbender - they might train in secret. A firebender...."

"Sooner or later, he's going to lose his temper," Zuko agreed grimly. "I know. I can't just abandon him!"

"Of course you cannot," Iroh agreed. *Though your sister would. In a heartbeat.*

"He needs to get out of Ba Sing Se," Zuko muttered.

"Ah? And to where?" Iroh pointed out. "Where can a young firebender go, and be beyond the war's reach?"

"...I don't know."

"Eat," Iroh advised. "Let us enjoy this duck, and perhaps an answer will come." It was delicious. Perhaps he could convince Lady Amaya to share another, some days from now. They were a bit cheaper that way....

Be in the moment.

Bones polished clean, Iroh leaned back in his chair, while Zuko gathered up dishes and blew a surreptitious breath of steam to warm the wash-water. "A firebender, of Ba Sing Se." The retired general shook his head, amused at his own lack of foresight. "I should have considered this might be possible, once we learned of the waterbenders of the Foggy Swamp. It is within the Earth Kingdom, yet it seems they *are* Water Tribe. Of a sort."

"So, what? The spirits get confused in the Earth Kingdom?" Zuko's brow climbed. "Why is it strange Jinhai was born here? Plenty of firebenders are born in the colonies."

"Under the rule of the Fire Nation," Iroh said practically. "Bending is in part our spirit's way of influencing the world. And it is channeled by the philosophy of our nation. Ba Sing Se is the heart of the Earth Kingdom. Any bender born here, should be born of earth."

"For once, Uncle? Your philosophers are dead wrong," Zuko said grimly, tipping dishes into hot water.

"How so?" Iroh eyed his nephew, curious.

"I mean, if it was just your philosophy, how could anybody be the Avatar?" Zuko said quickly. "He has to be born in one of the four nations."

"True," Iroh allowed. *Though that was not what you were thinking of.* He frowned. "But I have never heard of two elements being born in the same family...." He hesitated, an old rumor drifting out of memory. "Kyoshi Island."

"They have a lot of blue eyes," Zuko recalled, arms crossed as he waited for the dishes to soak. "The Southern Water Tribe trades there a lot, right?"

"For centuries. And the island is neither fully of the Earth Kingdom, nor of Water Tribe territory," Iroh said thoughtfully. "In the past, both earthbenders and waterbenders have called it home."

"Ba Sing Se takes in everyone, as long as you keep your head down and don't cause *trouble*." Zuko's eyes narrowed. "That's not what you said earth is like."

"No," Iroh said darkly. "Earth is diverse. Strong. Not rigid. Not *punishing*." He breathed in steam from his teacup. "So they have bought their safety with their ideals, and lost themselves."

"Because there's more than one element born here? Kyoshi Island didn't give up who they were," Zuko objected.

"That is true," Iroh murmured, struck by the fierce glitter of green eyes. *Like dragon's fire.* "Nor has Lady Amaya. Nor have we. To hide in the face of overwhelming force, is not to give up. It is adaptability. Perseverance. Will." He chuckled, dryly amused. "Water, earth, and fire."

"It's not funny," Zuko said grimly. "If *any* element can be born here...."

"Jinhai will not be the last." Iroh nodded, troubled. "And those of our people who believe themselves safely hidden, are not." He paused, seeing a sudden misery in the slump of his nephew's shoulders. "Zuko?"

"Not any element," Zuko said quietly. "There's no freedom."

And without that, air could never rest within a spirit. "No," Iroh agreed sadly. "Not here...."

Green met green, eyes widening. "Somewhere else," Zuko breathed.

Iroh raised a brow, silently encouraging his nephew to go on. If Zuko's thoughts had followed the same path as his - it would *not* be following Ozai's will.

And yet, the Fire Lord has not ordered that Zuko could not do it, Iroh thought wryly. And it would help our people.

Tread carefully, nephew. Please. You walk between your loyalties, even now.

"What if there were somewhere else to go?" Zuko said slowly. "Somewhere - not safe, nowhere's safe. But free. For everyone."

"Such a place does not exist," Iroh stated. And paused, for one heartbeat. "Yet."

"That would be...." Zuko swallowed dryly. "A lot to pull off," he whispered.

"Hmm." Iroh stroked his beard, keeping his expression merely thoughtful. "You are trained in the movement of troops, Prince Zuko."

"Yes, but this is-"

"And in building field encampments, and evacuations in the face of hostile forces."

"Yes, but Uncle-"

"And in what is required both to build a new colony, and see that it flourishes." Iroh gave him a knowing smile.

Zuko winced. "You *know* what happened with Azula."

"I know that we had relatively little time to plan, and serious disadvantages entering the fight," Iroh said plainly. "Yet you accomplished your goal. We lived, and the Avatar survived, and Azula does not yet have him."

"I almost lost you!"

"Then we will need to plan more carefully, this time," Iroh said firmly. "Now. What is the first piece of intelligence you need to construct such a plan?"

Zuko bowed his head, thinking. "A location," he said at last; uncertain, as if he couldn't believe he was saying it. "What we need to get there, how we get there, what we'll need when we reach it - all of that's going to depend on *where*."

"Consider that I may have some possibilities in mind," Iroh said mildly.

Zuko's eyes widened. "You do?"

Iroh beamed.

Make a place to go.

Sitting in his room with a pitcher of water, Zuko lifted a hand, and let it fall, studying how water rose and fell with it. It was easier and harder than fire. Easier to move; it *wanted* to move, even trapped in a pitcher. Push and pull and *change* was part of what it was.

But if moving it was easy, knowing when you were moving it wasn't. Fire was a sword in his hands. Water was - damn, Uncle could always find the right words, why couldn't he?

Frustration curled his hand in a snap of motion. Water twisted with it, over and over, the curl tightening until it collapsed in on itself and splashed back into the pitcher.

Like a net for an octopus.

Staring at rippling water, Zuko considered that thought. Three years on a ship. He'd caught his own baitfish plenty of times. Using a net... and a flow of motion, that echoed what he'd seen of Katara's bending.

See your target. He marked a spot in midair. *Arrange the folds.* One hand to grip gently, the other poised to fling-

Coolness swept over his skin, and he almost dropped it all.

Hold! Don't look at - at the net. Look at the target. Just hold. And wait.

All the while feeling hands that were and weren't wet. Spirits, this was weird.

And throw. With the little half-twist at the end that took *forever* to master, just enough torque to fling weighted edges wide over the unsuspecting school-

Water snapped around air like a jeweled flytrap, dragging a clear bubble back with a tug of his hands.

It worked? Incredulous, Zuko cupped the bubble in one hand, and poked it with a finger. Wet, and then dry; he'd caught his target, even if it had only been-

Splash.

Wiping droplets off his face, Zuko sighed. And started carefully sweeping his hands to gather the puddle off the floor. *This is going to take some work.*

An hour later, he guided a globe of dirty water into the sink, and let it flow away. Crept back into his own room, silently sliding the screen closed, and collapsed.

Got it. I think.

Water was different. Slower. Not as sharp as the motions you had to make with fire.

Like trying to write backwards.

His eyes snapped open in the darkness. Backwards? Or left-handed?

The rhythm's different. Push and pull, not a heartbeat. But they both flow. Water, and the fire outside.

I can do this.

And if he could make waterbending work... then maybe, just maybe, Uncle wasn't chasing flying pigs after all.

Don't try to find a place for our people. There isn't one. Anywhere.

So we have to make one.

Oh boy. This was going to be a lot more complicated than ambushing Azula and living to tell about it.

I need to make notes. A lot of notes.

...Starting tomorrow.

He was asleep almost before he finished pulling the covers up.

Chapter End Notes

By Vathara: A/N: Some of you have asked about Sozin's style of firebending, and why Zuko has such a problem with it. Here's a few plotoles for your enjoyment. Warning, some of these are spoilers....

At one point in the Avatar canon, we see an unnamed Fire Nation Avatar, in the past, summoning volcanoes to erupt. Which implies he could *stop* them, one hopes. We also see Kyoshi work with lava when she splits Kyoshi Island off from the mainland.

And yet Roku not only doesn't *know* his island is going to erupt, he gets killed by it.

Sometime between Kyoshi and Roku, a critical part of firebending *must have been lost*.

Combine that with the creators' statement that "Fire Lord" *used* to mean just the head Fire Sage. But by Sozin's time it obviously doesn't; he's the crown prince, and it's hereditary. And, when he's helping Roku with the volcano, he does *not* bend the lava - he bends the heat out of it to cool it.

Add to that the fact that Kyoshi created the Dai Li. And that she was Avatar for over *two centuries*. What *else* did she do?

Some answers will turn up in later chapters. To put it shortly - in this AU, the "darkest day in Fire Nation history" was *during* an eclipse. But the eclipse itself was the least of their problems.

As for why Zuko has problems? Remember what Iroh said a few chapters back. Zuko handles energy in a way most firebenders just *don't*. Not for a very long time.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Finally, back on a sane schedule, Huojin thought cheerfully, striding up Amaya's clinic steps. Not that he was really happy to be bringing her this news, but getting back to his regular shift was a relief for the whole family-

Rock-gloves darkened by early morning shadows, a Dai Li agent was knocking on Amaya's door.

Don't panic!

A practiced thought; just enough to keep his reaction to the flinch of an honest man, given the excitement these past few days.

Stay calm, Huojin reminded himself, nodding to the earthbender with polite wariness. A tall, lean-faced man; the uniform made it hard to say for certain, but Huojin thought he was more wiry than heavy-boned. *If they knew anything, there wouldn't be just one.*

Unless the rest of them are just burrowed out of sight....

He loved his city, he truly did. But every now and then, when the paranoia spawned by what he was seemed to grab him by the throat-

I wish there were something better. Somewhere to be free.

Lee opened the door, and vague wishes flew right out of Huojin's head. *Oh, Agni. This is not good.*

"Can we help you?" Lee said levelly.

"I am here for Healer Amaya," the agent said formally, not even blinking at the scar.

"That makes two of us," Huojin put in, almost as formal. "We've had a report of a potential plague on the docks. Something in from Omashu. We need to track it down and head it off, quick."

The agent looked unhappy, but still willing to argue. "The patient is at the palace."

"I'll tell her," Lee stated. And closed the door in their faces.

I don't know whether to laugh or cry, Huojin thought, frozen. Though the look on the Dai Li's face was *priceless*.

A minute, and Amaya opened the door. "Human or animal?" she asked the agent briskly.

The agent shifted slightly. Maybe he was sweating? Not likely. "We were requested to bring you with all due speed."

"Is it that bear again?"

Under the tasseled hat, the man actually looked a little sheepish. "It's important to the Earth King-"

"Lee. Pack your kit."

"Me?" The young firebender looked more inclined to bolt right back to the docks. Huojin couldn't blame him.

"He has more experience with animals than humans, at the moment," Amaya said frankly, gripping Lee's shoulder and turning the reluctant teen back inside. "Chest of animal treatment scrolls, third drawer down, red ribbon." She glanced back at the agent as Lee retreated. "I have no doubt he can handle the situation until I've finished assisting the city."

The agent inclined his head. Straightened, and started, as Lee reappeared. "What are you doing with a firepot?"

Packed kit in one hand, Lee touched the strap holding both waterskin and firepot slung over his shoulder. "Animals don't always understand that you're trying to help. Warm water doesn't startle them so much. And sometimes you want hot water to clean things out, before you try to heal them."

Good answer. Huojin tried not to look too relieved. He should have known the kid would have a cover story ready. They'd gotten here, hadn't they?

"Lee was on the road quite some time," Amaya said with honest affection. "He's come across a few techniques they didn't teach at the North Pole." She rested a hand on his shoulder, and nodded. "You'll do fine."

Huojin watched them head down the street to a waiting carriage. Sighed, and followed Amaya back inside to collect her own kit. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"He knows what not to say, and he knows his uncle's life depends on his ability to pass as Lee, the waterbending healer," Amaya said quietly. "He's sword-steel, Huojin. He won't break."

"I thought he was rough jade," Huojin quipped.

"That, too." Stuffing a few last packets of herbs into her bag, Amaya smiled at him. "You should have seen him with Jinhai. He may look merciless, but there's a kind heart under all the scars." Her smile faded, chased away by worry. "Huojin. Normally I would keep this quiet for the family, but if something goes wrong, you may need to know. Jinhai needs training. Lee and Mushi's kind of training." She shook her head. "I only hope Meixiang and Tingzhe agree to let Lee help."

For a moment, it felt like all the air had been sucked out of his lungs. "The accidents," Huojin managed. "The burns. The *fires*."

"Apparently, a sequence of events that is not uncommon," Amaya said dryly. "Lee advised that they put sand buckets in every room. And ban Jinhai from going near the stove until he gets more control." She arched a brow. "He was also insistent that Jinhai get as much sunlight as possible. I know waterbenders are stronger when the moon shines, but Lee says firebenders *need* the sun. That without it, they - starve. They get desperate."

"Yeah?" Huojin ventured.

"He carefully avoided saying *how* desperate."

Ah. True. Lee was, apparently, justifiably paranoid. He would have kept that to himself, just on "don't want to give people an opening" principles. Huojin let out a slow breath, bringing up old memories and things he'd learned from other refugees. "Insane covers it," he said bluntly. "Too long, and they can die. It's like the prison barges you hear about for earthbenders, out at sea. If there's none of your element around-"

"Something in your spirit dies," Amaya finished. And picked up her kit. "Shall we?"

Outside, Huojin led their way through twisting streets toward the docks. "You seem pretty forgiving toward a kid who - well."

"Would you blame someone for striking you, if he were delirious in fever?"

Huojin frowned. "He wasn't sick."

"Yes, he was," Amaya said sadly. "He still is. Though he's healed a great deal, even in these few days. That scar didn't just burn his flesh, Huojin. It burned his spirit. He's been hanging onto humanity by his fingertips, and it seemed as if I had taken away the last person he loved in the world. I would be far more worried if he *hadn't* attacked me."

The guard squinted, trying to follow a healer's twisty logic. "Because that would mean he stopped fighting."

"Yes." She chuckled ruefully. "Though I'm beginning to think Lee simply refuses to recognize that giving up is an option."

"Scary kid," Huojin muttered.

"Yes. He is."

The thoughtfulness of that tone prickled the hairs on the back of his neck all over again. "Did something happen?"

"It's not what happened that worries me," Amaya said carefully. "It's what Lee said about it later. You've traded stories with people who've served on the Wall."

Not a question. Exactly. "In quiet corners, sure," Huojin said frankly. Often with a few drinks on hand, and a friendly bartender who understood some bloody stories weren't enough reason to call the Dai Li. A lot of Wall veterans ended up joining the Guard, after years or injuries slowed them down. "You've treated plenty of them."

"Yes. But apparently they never wanted to burden a healer with the thought that some of their opponents seemed - inhuman. Too strong. Too fast." She arched a brow at him.

"I've heard some stories," Huojin admitted, after a moment to check no tasseled hats were in sight. "Not the average soldiers, but when imperial firebenders come out to play.... Some of them supposedly dodge arrows. Others kick rocks out of the way, even when a bender's still moving them. Crazy stuff like that-" He cut himself off, swords flashing in a teashop in his memory.

Jet was fresh. Lee was exhausted.

Yet Lee had kept up anyway, blow for blow. And that blazingly swift *slice*, that should have ended the fight permanently if Jet wasn't half circus acrobat.... *Oh, Agni.*

He blew out a breath. "What'd you hear about?"

"An oak cellar door with a granite cover, shattered in one shove," Amaya said frankly.

"Um." And what, exactly, did you say to that?

"As I said, it was the reaction that was interesting," Amaya observed. "Apparently? It *wasn't a big deal.*"

"Really," Huojin said warily.

"In part, or so the story went, because someone who was *really* skilled, could simply shove, and send a person skidding over ten yards away."

"Someone?" Huojin winced. *Mushi.*

"Have you ever heard a rumor like that?"

"No," Huojin said honestly. "No, I haven't." He grimaced. "Though from what I have heard, a lot of people didn't come back, six years ago. And it makes sense to guess those people... well. Maybe they saw a lot more than people just on the Wall."

Amaya nodded.

"I told you who I think they are." Huojin kept his voice down, covered by the morning crowds. "I guess I should have thought it through myself." *Oh, Agni. We've got a pair of great name, imperial firebenders on our hands. Now what do we do?*

"Well," Amaya reflected, "it's good to have a frame of reference, to determine exactly what Lee means when he says his skills are *passable*."

Urk. Huojin tried not to shiver. Passable as a healer's apprentice was one thing. Passable as an imperial firebender? A whole other kettle of catfish-eels.

Ba Sing Se soldiers never take them one on one. Not even our earthbenders. They use three on one odds, at least. Even then, you're going to lose people. Huojin muffled a groan. *Oma and Shu, what'd I do to deserve this?*

Well. At least now he knew why Mushi was convinced Lee *hadn't* tried to kill him. "What are we going to do?"

"Do?" Mischief sparkled in blue eyes. "I think they've handled things quite well so far. Don't you?"

"Well, yes, but-"

"They're looking for a place to rest," Amaya said softly. Narrowed her eyes at him. "They're not walking weapons, Huojin. They're people."

People and walking weapons, Huojin thought unhappily. Not that he thought they meant to start anything. That pair wouldn't have gotten this far if they let their tempers lead the way. Even Lee. The kid might bristle like a porcupine-pig, but he hadn't so much as raised a hand until someone threatened his uncle.

But if anything did get started, those two would *finish* it. Permanently.

I should have let the Dai Li have Jet.

Bad thought. Try not to go there. Done was done, and he'd just have to hope Fire Nation honor was everything his people said it was. Mushi had said they were looking for a fresh start-

No. No, he said they had no choice. Someone wants Lee dead... hell, if they've been declared traitors to the Dragon Throne, the whole Fire Nation wants them dead.

Big difference. Huge.

"So exactly what sort of plague are we looking for?" Amaya asked.

Think about them later, Huojin told himself. "Not sure. You ever hear of something called pentapox?"

Glad he was light on his feet, Zuko whipped back around the corner, out of sight of the open doorway. "What the heck is that?"

Under the formally calm mask, the Dai Li agent looked mildly amused. "It's a bear."

"That is *not* a platypus-bear."

A hint of humor glimmered in green eyes. "No, it isn't."

"Or a skunk-bear. Or a gopher-bear. Or even a *polar* bear."

The agent actually raised an eyebrow at him. "Where did you see a polar bear?"

"...The Water Tribes bring pelts into ports, sometimes." Which was true. No need to mention one of the white monsters had tried to eat him once.

"Hmm." The Dai Li gave him a slight smile. "Weirdest thing you ever saw, huh?"

Zuko stood there a moment, bits of the past few months flashing through his mind. The Avatar, eyes and tattoos glowing, rising in a waterspout that swept his men from the decks. The Fire Nation fleet, destroyed by a giant watery monster. His uncle, stripped to a loincloth, swinging chains to fight off earthbenders.

...Spirits, was he *never* going to get that sight out of his head?

"No," Zuko managed at last. "Not really." Ignoring the man's curious look, he opened Amaya's scroll again, reading carefully. *Take it slow. Get it right the first time.* Rolling the scroll back up, he stalked through the door.

"You're not Amaya." Patting the groaning bear, a young, bespectacled man in glasses and ornate Earth Kingdom green looked him over, puzzled. "You may bow, now."

I may what?!?

But he could feel the Dai Li's eyes boring into him, so Zuko throttled his temper and knelt along with the agent. At least it wasn't a full prostration. He'd be *damned* if he'd do that *ever again*.

"We are your majesty's humble servants," the agent said smoothly, as if he hadn't just tried to glare a hole through Zuko's head.

"Yes, yes, I know. But where's Amaya? Bosco's feeling so *awful*."

The bear groaned, like a massively oversized toddler with a tummy-ache.

"Master Amaya had a healing emergency with the Guard, your majesty," Zuko said, trying not to stumble over the odd address. There weren't any kings in the Fire Nation. Hadn't ever been. Unless you counted some of the *waegu* kings and queens centuries back, and no honorable great name would *ever* count a pirate as noble blood. "I'm her apprentice, Lee."

"Someone's hurt?" Narrow eyes widened behind glass, concerned. "I hope it's not serious."

"She's trying to make sure it's not," Zuko managed, trying to buy time to think. *This is a city. A huge city. People get hurt all the time just by accident.*

And one of the people who do it on purpose is kneeling right next to me.

Yet there wasn't a sliver of the glass-sharp *precision* Azula's voice would have had, saying the same words. Not a hint of the sadistic smirk his sister would have worn, knowing a peasant was at her nonexistent mercy. And knowing they knew it, too.

No. The man honestly seemed worried. In a distracted, optimistic way that reminded him all too much of one particular hyperactive airbender.

Why do I feel like there are two adults in this room - and I'm one of them?

Head down. Mouth shut. Things were wrong here, in a way he couldn't pin down. Better to keep his eyes open, and see what happened next.

"Well, don't just stand there. Come and give Bosco a hand!" the Earth King said cheerfully. "Don't worry; he's an *excellent* judge of character."

The bear growled.

...I am so dead.

"She sent someone else?" Long Feng, Grand Secretariat of Ba Sing Se and self-made power behind the throne, frowned at the report. At the information, not the agent, Quan; he had his Dai Li's unswerving loyalty for a reason. "I thought we knew of all the waterbenders in Ba Sing Se." Not that there were many, besides Healer Amaya and the Avatar's young teacher. Most of the rest were minor fishing flotsam washed up on Ba Sing Se's docks, and they tended to stay there. Amaya might never have had official combat training, thanks to the North Pole's restrictive customs, but her refusal of her family's chosen betrothal had apparently come with an inventive streak. One she tended to use on anyone who threatened to, as they'd put it, drag her back North where she belonged.

"The boy's new," Quan informed him, leaning against the wall where he'd bent a rock-tunnel to listen in on the Earth King. "Lee; no family name known. We're tracking his records now. Half Foggy Swamp, from one of the reports."

Mixed blood. Hmm. That was never predictable. Look at Kyoshi Island, jealously guarding their neutrality for almost a century, before that improbable contingent of warrior women had shown up at Full Moon Bay. At least the Fire Nation colonies forced *order* on their half-blooded spawn. Even if it was the enemy's order.

"But you can tell he's met a firebender," Quan went on, gesturing toward his left eye.

Scarred, then. And still alive to tell about it? Interesting. "How did he explain that to the Earth King?" Not that he expected Amaya would send someone suicidal enough to tell Kuei about the war, but you could never be too sure.

"He didn't," Quan said wryly.

"Really." Long Feng arched an elegant brow. "And?" Usually, his agents didn't wait to offer pertinent details.

A wry delight danced in Quan's eyes. "You might want to listen to this, sir." A wave of his hand opened the listening hole a little wider, just enough for both of them to hear.

"Grrgh! Arrgh!" Bosco snarled.

"Really, I don't think-" Kuei started.

"*Sit! Down!*" an unfamiliar teenage voice snapped, obviously out of patience.

"Graargh!"

"*That means you, too!*"

"Grr? Eeep!"

The next sounds were horrendously unpleasant, and reminded Long Feng of an earthbender's attempt to unclog a storm drain gone horribly, horribly wrong.

"Grrr-yipe!"

"Eww...." Kuei's voice faded, and cloth swished.

"You could have let him drop," the teenager grumbled.

"Drop his majesty?" Dai Li agent Shirong's voice held stifled laughter. Which turned to a gasping cough. "Ugh... Lee, what *is* that thing?"

Something squelched, and rattled. "Earring. I think. Big one. Made to look like grapes," Lee got out, with the breathless tone of someone trying not to breathe through his nose. "Jade and amethyst, maybe...."

"Hey... we had a *report* on that going missing!"

"Well," Lee gasped, "you've got it. Soon as someone cleans it up. Boils it, maybe." Another ragged breath. "You *idiot!* This isn't food!"

"Growf?"

"So. That's it." Lee breathed shallowly. "One sore gut, courtesy of *eating rocks*." He groaned. "Anything else?"

"I'll send in some help," the agent said kindly. "With a bathing robe, so you can get cleaned off."

"Thanks," the teenager said fervently. And gulped. "Hurry?"

"On my way."

Long Feng closed the hole with a practiced clench of his fist, and traded a speaking glance with Quan. "Shirong seems to like him." Given Shirong was one of their more skilled recruiters, when not attending to his other duties, that was... interesting.

"I'll put a rush on the report, sir," Quan nodded.

"Make sure he's not chased out of the bath too soon," Long Feng said dryly. "From the sound of that, we'll *all* appreciate it."

Hot water. Holding his breath, Zuko submerged completely, feeling clean warmth sink all the way into his bones. This was his third change of water, and he was finally beginning to feel like he could face food again.

The stone tub vibrated. "Don't drown in there."

Reluctantly, Zuko surfaced. And looked into startled green eyes.

Oops.

In a place that claimed there was no war, letting others see his scars probably wasn't... wise. Or conducive to survival.

"Apprentice healer?" the Dai Li agent said neutrally, politely turning his back.

Wrapping a towel around himself, Zuko tried to stay calm. "My mother didn't have time to teach me much before she was - gone. Uncle couldn't help. And Master Amaya's the first waterbender I've met who didn't try to skewer me with ice." *Careful. You're a lousy liar. Stick to Amaya's story. Tell little bits, and let him put them together.*

Turning toward him, the agent studied him for a long, thoughtful minute. "I can see why." Reaching out, a rock glove brushed the air near damp black hair. "Let that grow out enough for a topknot, and you could pass."

Getting out of warm water, Zuko shivered. "Don't even joke about that."

"Wasn't joking. It's always good to have another boulder to throw." He stepped back, and nodded. "I'm Shirong. I think we may be seeing more of each other." A deliberate pause. "When you check on the bear again."

Not quite a threat. I think.

"The clothes are yours. Call them recompense for the... unpleasantness." A wry look. "Someone will be here shortly with Healer Amaya's fee. They'll escort you out."

A rumble of stone, and he was gone.

Clothes?

On a table were his brown robes, freshly washed but still too wet to wear. Beside them, just far enough away that they wouldn't get damp, were another set. Not fancy; a bit of embroidery at collar and hems to add interest to durable fabric. About Middle Ring respectable, given what he'd seen around the Wen house.

Green. Argh.

Browns might be typically Earth Kingdom, but they weren't *too* far off the dark tones found in Fire Nation uniforms. It didn't seem right to be wearing green. Even a dark green. So dark it was almost the color of Dai Li uniforms....

Okay. Spooked now.

Nerves yelping or not, he was not going to be caught half-dressed by whoever was coming.

Green it is.

Dressing quickly, Zuko wrapped the outer robe around him. And paused, one hand pulling up a sleeve. *Something's not right.*

Another careful rub of fabric between his fingers, and he was sure. *There's something in the hem of these.*

No time to worry about it now. He wrapped and tied his sash, just as the door opened.

Amaya sat across from her friend and longtime patient, wishing she had Mushi's touch with tea. Her ginseng was bracing, but far from soothing. "I realize this must be a shock-"

"Finding out Avatar Kyoshi created the Dai Li, that was a shock," the graying professor said gruffly. "Having one of my brightest students disappear just before he was qualified to teach for an indiscreet comment on current politics, *that* was a shock. This? This is a *disaster*. "

"It's not Jinhai's fault," Amaya stated firmly.

"Try telling that to Min," Tingzhe Wen said tartly. "He's seeing his chances of joining the most elite earthbenders go up in flames. Literally." The professor stared into his cup. "Where did I go wrong, Amaya? I tried to raise my children to be honest, and upright, and to know how to use the minds the spirits gave them. And all Min wants to do is join those silencing us all." His lip curled. "For an earthbender, perhaps he's the one with too much of his mother in him."

Amaya's eyes narrowed.

Yet even as he said it, Tingzhe looked stricken. "Oma and Shu, I didn't mean-"

"I know," the healer said levelly. Better this poison came out of his system now, with her, than in a fight with Meixiang. "You've heard some of my stories of the Northern Water Tribe. Meixiang's people don't have a monopoly on the lust for power. Spirits, if they did, there would be no Dai Li." She softened her voice, using the matter-of-fact tone a fellow teacher would respond to. "But in a way, you are right, as well. Min has always had a drive to be the *best*. And everyone knows the Dai Li *are* the best. And he's sixteen. His family has always been there for him. He doesn't realize his choices could truly threaten the people he cares about."

"And this boy you want to teach Jinhai?" Tingzhe said pointedly. "Isn't he sixteen?"

"Lee is different," Amaya replied. "He's learned some very hard lessons. He's lost most of his family, and almost died himself. That changes you." She smiled. "Sixteen, yes, and he does have a temper, but Lee is far more grownup than most people I've met."

Slam!

Damp hair wild, dressed in green when she'd sent him off in brown, Lee stalked in with a bundle of damp clothing and a look that had probably sent innocent passersby and no few would-be muggers running in terror. "I want to forget today *ever happened*. "

"What was wrong with him?" Amaya asked warily.

"Note six," Lee growled, handing over her scrolls and a bag of coin-strings.

"Oh dear." That particular personal note on the chi chart being to the effect that Bosco could and would try to eat anything that vaguely tasted like food. She still didn't know how he'd managed to swallow a soup ladle without anyone noticing, and she wasn't inclined to find out.

"That? Was *disgusting*," Lee said faintly, gripping the bridge of his nose to hold back a stress headache. A very practical maneuver; she'd used it herself, often.

He does it without even thinking. Does he ever relax?

"I don't ever want to do that again, but they said someone was going to have to check on the bear, and...." Lee ground to a halt, taking in her startled guest. "You must be Professor Tingzhe Wen."

"I must, eh?" The earthbender looked Lee up and down, as if studying an essay about to be splashed with red ink.

A shadow of a smile passed over Lee's face. "Jinhai looks a lot like you."

Tingzhe leaned back in his chair, a hint of interest in hazel eyes. "That's not something I hear often."

"You don't? Oh. Because of the eyes, and...." Lee ducked his head a little. "It's the way he looks when he's trying to figure you out. You can see him thinking it over, and... sorry. I'm not real good with people."

Better than you think, Amaya considered, pleasantly surprised. Tingzhe had come in prepared for a fight, and all her efforts had barely brought him down to a simmer. Lee's simple words, a *firebender* affirming that Jinhai was Tingzhe's son first, and anything else only after that....

Charming people are a copper a dozen, and worth even less. You, and your uncle under the scheming... you're sincere. That's rare.

...Damn, the time. "People will be in for appointments soon," Amaya said, rising. "The two of you should take this discussion into the garden."

Tingzhe nodded, standing.

Lee hesitated. "Master Amaya. That official matter?"

You don't mention plague, because you don't want people to panic if it's not true. Smart boy.

"Completely groundless," Amaya assured him. And couldn't help but smirk. "Apparently someone played a nasty practical joke on the Fire Nation forces occupying Omashu. One that let them evacuate the entire city." She crossed her arms, imagining the chagrin when that army found out they'd been had. "I'd like to meet this Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe. He must be a wise, skilled warrior-"

Lee made a choking noise.

She eyed him.

"...Nothing, patients, I'll just-"

"You've met him." Tingzhe gave Lee a considering glance. "And if I know young men, you came off the worst." He *tched*. "I know it's difficult to accept at your age, but there's nothing wrong with

losing to a more experienced man-

"He's *fifteen!* "

Dead silence.

Lee kept his hands from clenching with an effort. "Fifteen, and he's a *moron*, with flashes of tactical brilliance. The moron part would have gotten him killed a long time ago, except for one *small* detail. He's traveling with the *Avatar*. " Her apprentice let out a breath, visibly forcing himself to calm down. "So you're right. I fought him. And I lost." Lee bowed to her, jaw set. "Master. I need a little air."

"Go," she said, troubled. Keeping just enough of an eye on him to be sure he headed into the garden, and not back out on the street with unsuspecting passersby. Waited long enough for him to get out of earshot, and whistled. "Well. I certainly didn't expect that." *Either he met Sokka traveling... or I was right, and he has been to the poles. Both of them.*

Staring at the screens to the garden, the professor blinked, and glanced at her. "It explains a great deal of the prickliness. It's one thing to lose fairly. To lose because your opponent brought his own army along, that's quite another matter. Especially to an *honorable* young man."

"His uncle swears Lee wasn't part of the war," Amaya protested. *Even if he was trained for it.*

"My dear healer, we're all part of the war," Tingzhe said dryly. "He may not have been a soldier, but if a Water Tribe boy ended up in the same town with your apprentice - your people have a long history of attacking enemies first."

Amaya frowned, uncertain how to take that. "So who do you believe was at fault?"

"How should I know? I wasn't there," Tingzhe stated gruffly. And frowned. "He has some very interesting turns of phrase, your Lee. If he wasn't in the army, he certainly received a military education. Though I imagine that's true of most firebenders, these days." He stood there a long moment, thinking. "I haven't made up my mind. Not yet. But I would like to speak with him. If you believe he'll calm down any time soon?"

"He's probably calm now," Amaya sighed. "Or at least controlled. He's good at that." *Too good, I think.*

"Hmm." Tingzhe gave her a dry smile. "Well then. Time to face the dragon."

He's a very small dragon.

Approaching quietly, Tingzhe took a moment to study the young man seated on the ground, trailing his fingers in Amaya's pond. Really, it was a wonder he'd managed to pass unnoticed this long. The fine, lean features, the pale skin... add a topknot, change green eyes and robe to gold and red, and he'd be any young great name right out of the classical scrolls.

A testament to how much people simply don't see, I imagine.

"Eleven," Lee said quietly. "I counted them all. Three times." He looked at the water, obviously seeing... somewhere else. "That's how many of our men we pulled out of the water, after they were gone. The water that was ice, on the deck... and the water that wasn't, overboard." He shook his head, slowly. "The spearmen Katara froze got lucky. Once we broke them out, they just needed

some hot drinks. But by the time we got the ship out of the iceberg and turned around for the ones the *Avatar* swept overboard... it was so close. Too close." He swallowed dryly. "I had to count. I didn't know all their names. That water's so *cold*.... "

Cold, and dark. The two most sure ways to kill a firebender. Decided, Tingzhe sat down. "And that's how you met Sokka?"

"I don't expect you to understand." Lee still wouldn't look at him. "The Fire Lord has declared the Avatar an enemy of the Fire Nation. We had to investigate. We didn't hurt anyone!" He yanked his fingers out of the water, drops rising off as steam. "We scared people. We threatened women and children. I'm not proud of that. The Avatar promised to go with us, and - our commander promised not to hurt anyone. *We left.* " A deep breath. "And then Sokka and his waterbending sister decided to land a *ten-ton flying monster* on our ship, and everything went to hell."

The professor kept silent, using decades of a life of reason and logic to work his way past his first, emotional reactions. Shock wouldn't help anyone. Neither would anger at a young man who'd been doing... well, what quite a few of his countrymen apparently thought was the reasonable thing to do. "I understand that the Fire Nation sets a high value on honor," Tingzhe said levelly. "If your commander did offer a prisoner reasonable parole, and he broke it, even with outside instigation... yes, from what I've read of your history, that's a grave insult indeed." He regarded the young man carefully. "What truly surprises me is that you're more upset about the casualties."

Lee shrugged, as if it didn't matter what he thought. "Sokka's dangerous. He turns things loose, and he doesn't think. He gets out of things because he's lucky, not because he's trained. His sister's a master waterbender, and his friend is the Avatar, so he's got a lot of luck on his side. And spirits." Closing his eyes, Lee hugged his knees to his chest. "Ask Master Amaya about the North Pole. I *don't* want to think about it."

A century of war, your nation has unleashed on mine. His students might joke that he still lived in the reign of the forty-sixth Earth King, but Tingzhe was perfectly well aware of the war. There just wasn't anything he could do about it, save help his people remember their past, so they would have hope of a better future. *I should feel pleased at the Avatar's retribution.*

But this wasn't the Fire Lord. This was a scarred young man who'd seen as much horror as any veteran on the Wall. Who'd fled the war, just as Meixiang had.

Stop stalling, Tingzhe told himself firmly. *You already know what you've decided.* "My wife says you want to teach Jinhai to put fires out."

"It's the first thing my mother taught me." Lee uncurled to look at him, green eyes bright and serious as fire. "My sister - there were a lot of benders around, and... you don't want two benders flaring the same flame. It's harder than starting a fire, but it makes things safer. Less scary." Lee's glance slid sideways; returned, determined. "He'll always be yours first, you know. Uncle says other nations aren't bound by loyalty the same way we are. Not in their spirits. Jinhai's a firebender, and you're his parents, and he loves you. No matter what I teach him, he'll always look to you first. Always."

Tingzhe tried not to start, recognizing the archaic phrase from one of the old letters he'd recently found in the university's collection.

"Who do you look to, dragon-born?"

"I am cast upon the waves, for my clan is fled, and our stronghold ashes."

"Who would you look to, dragon-born?"

"I seek a great name, one worthy of my blade and fire."

-Or so the story goes, the letter went on. Which should have clued in the hapless oni that all he was going to get was coin-hire, not loyalty, and when the clan regrouped, he'd be ogre flambé. But that's folktales for you. And now you're chasing folktales in Ba Sing Se. Father, please be careful. I know you promised your friend, but your clan needs you too.

A few days' research hadn't been enough to track down what Lady Kotone's father had promised, but given a letter written only decades ago had been tucked into scrolls on Avatar Yangchen, the last Air Nomad Avatar... well.

Perhaps it's better not to mention that Avatar Aang visited the university only a few days ago. Body or pride, sometimes the best medicine is time. "I'll speak with Amaya about a good time for you to come," Tingzhe said bluntly.

"Can you be there?"

Given he'd been about to put his foot down on just that, the professor arched a foreboding brow.

"Fire and earth aren't as different as people think," Lee explained. "The stances aren't the same, and we spend a lot more time in the air. But if you watch, you'll see... things in common." He let out a breath, and nodded, determined. "So if something goes wrong, and the Dai Li catch me - you'll know where to start to help Jinhai teach himself."

Tingzhe scowled at him. "You will *not* get caught. Not if you're careful."

"I'm careful," Lee said dryly. "Things just happen around me. No matter what I plan. So it's better if you know. Besides, Madam Wen might want to brush up on her forms, too."

"My wife," Tingzhe said with deliberate calm, "is not a firebender."

"I know that," Lee said, obviously puzzled.

"So why would you think she knows any firebending forms?" Tingzhe went on, eyeing him as he would any student who hadn't done the assigned reading.

"Because *everyone* does?" Lee said, exasperated. "The ones for *self-defense*?" The young man looked suddenly thoughtful. "Unless she's like Huojin, mostly raised here...."

"No... you really do teach your women to fight?" Tingzhe shook his head, years of study suddenly tilted awry. "I've read references to women warriors, but I thought they were - well, myths. Like Wan Shi Tong, or the Blue Spirit. No one's ever *seen* one."

"Oh, *that's* going to change," Lee muttered. Gave him an incredulous look. "Kyoshi Island teaches women to fight."

"That may be true," the professor admitted, "but everyone knows they're a few stones short of a mountain."

Lee stared at him, as if he'd suggested walking into the midst of a pit of viper-hornets. "Suyin and Jia don't know how to fight?"

"Jia's a skilled earthbender," Tingzhe said impatiently. "I'm certain that if she had the misfortune to

deal with a rude young man, she could lock him up neatly until the guard arrived-

Lee buried his face in his hands.

"Young man, what is the *matter* with you?"

Lee shook his head, and looked up. "And what about Suyin? Or what if it's not a *rude young man* Jia has to deal with? What if it's Dai Li?"

Tingzhe gaped at him, aghast. "You can't fight the Dai Li!"

"Never give up without a fight." Fiery green bored into him. "If you want me to train Jinhai - then I train Suyin, too."

"She's not even a bender!"

"Some of the most dangerous people in the world aren't benders," Lee said impatiently. "Master Piandao defeated a hundred soldiers single-handed!"

"Who?"

Lee started to speak, and stopped. "Just - someone I heard of. Years ago." He folded his hands, straightening; equal to equal. "Please consider it. We can't always be there to protect the people we care about. The best thing we can do is teach them to protect themselves."

"I'll talk to Healer Amaya," Tingzhe said finally. "It's been very... interesting, to speak with you." He inclined his head, and Lee bowed.

The very picture of a polite young man, the professor thought, leaving. But when you truly care about something, when that inner fire flares... only a blind man can't see what you are.

What is a great name's son doing in Ba Sing Se?

Chapter End Notes

A/N by Vathara:

Waegu - Korean, "brigands from Wa", i.e. Japan. Came into Japanese as *wako*. Basically, pirates.

About Huojin's reaction to figuring out two imperial firebenders are on his hands - put it in context. You're a regular U.S. cop on the beat. You're armed, and so, legally, are a fair amount of your fellow citizens. (Let's not worry about the differences between steel and bending, at the moment.)

And then you find out two newcomers to the neighborhood have a Sherman tank parked in their backyard.

Yeah.

Of course, it's actually worse than Huojin thinks. Canon, we've seen Iroh and Zuko *flatten* about two dozen imperial firebenders... after drifting in the polar ocean for

three weeks, injured, hungry, and fending off sea vultures. And who knows what else.

Huojin's probably better off not knowing that....

Chapter 12

Click.

"Huh."

A whisper of thread and cloth. Another soft, almost inaudible *click*. "Uncle," Zuko said thoughtfully, "you might want to look at this."

Evening tea in hand, Iroh moved to see what his nephew was doing, sitting cross-legged on the floor with scissors and a bowl and... his new green robes, from which he had carefully pulled out the threads binding the hems. Oh dear.

Click.

Frowning, Iroh crouched to reach into the bowl, pressing a fingertip down to pick up one of the tiny stone beads. Gray, mostly quartz, no bigger than a millet grain... and one of many Zuko was picking out of the robe's inner hems. "And this was given to you by a Dai Li."

"I can think of a lot of things they could do to someone wearing these, and I don't like any of them," Zuko said grimly, picking out another bead. *Click.*

"Interesting," Iroh murmured, considering the potential motives behind such a perilous gift. Serious harm seemed possible, but unlikely; the amount of stone was small, and even an earthbender who knew they were there would be hard-pressed to pull them together swiftly enough to draw blood. They could tangle and bind, certainly, hampering an unwary wearer, but the trap was not as lethal as it first appeared-

Iroh's eyebrows arched in surprise, as an unlikely possibility occurred to him. "We must mend these tonight, after you have finished," the retired general said thoughtfully. "You should wear this, when you are called to check the bear again."

Zuko frowned, teasing out more stone. "They'll ask for Amaya."

"I believe they will ask for you."

Zuko stared at the bead in his hand, then at him. "This is some kind of test?"

"It may be."

"I stuck to the story," Zuko whispered, face ashen.

"There are some things you cannot hide. And they have nothing to do with that scar," Iroh added sharply, as his nephew's hand crept toward his face. *Spirits, how do I say this? My brother decreed you useless, and you have no idea how wrong he was.* "You have habits of caution most your age lack. You move in a balanced stance. You determine where in a room you are, and how you might best leave it if violence erupts. And while most within these walls are civilians, with no knowledge of what it is they see-

"The Dai Li aren't most." Zuko swallowed, and deliberately dropped the latest bead into the bowl. "It'd look worse if I showed up with these still there, wouldn't it?"

"For one they suspect has a warrior's training? Yes. It would."

"Jet," Zuko snarled, almost a curse.

"It is likely someone made note of that fight." Iroh stroked his beard, thinking. "Keep to our story. Your mother was Foggy Swamp, and we have traveled for years, mostly on the western coast. If this Shirong has already noted you can pass for Fire Nation, he may draw his own conclusions."

Zuko went from pale to red, shaking. "My parents were *married!*"

"And there is no reason to claim they were not," Iroh said calmly. "Sozin's forces were in the Earth Kingdom decades before I was born. If we are pressed, if there is no way to escape without some explanation - then admit you suspect one of your grandparents was a colonial. But insist the family has *never* spoken of such things. Which is fact, and will help the tale ring true."

His nephew looked down, fury fading. "I didn't intend to get us in trouble."

Iroh smiled, and rested a hand on his shoulder. "You cannot help being who you are, Prince Zuko. I do not think they believe you are an enemy."

"Then why-?"

"I do not yet know," Iroh said truthfully. Though he had suspicions. None of which quite made sense, given the Dai Li knew his nephew was not an earthbender. "Lean on Lee. Be wary, but calm, when they speak with you. You have done nothing wrong." He lowered himself to the floor, eyeing the opened hem. "Let us see how swiftly we can clear this trap."

Gather, and throw.

Water snapped closed around the candle, flickering flame trapped in a bubble of air. Letting out a slow breath, Zuko held the trailing strand of the water-net in his right hand. Carefully, concentrating, brought the main strand over with his left, and gingerly slipped it free. And tried, yet again, to do the impossible.

Water yields and changes. Use a light grip. Steady....

Reaching out with his left hand, he sought fierce determination. And pushed - slowly - down.

Inside the smoke-darkened bubble, the flame sank into a bare glow around the wick.

Two kinds of energy. Ow, my head.

No. He wasn't going to quit. Not yet.

Zuko reeled in the net, setting the candle down on the floor in front of him. This was where it had gone wrong a dozen times before....

Gentle movements. Like stroking fire-lilies.

Water curled back like petals, exposing the red-glowing wick. He held it to just that glow, despite the rush of fresh air. *Three, two, one....*

And released.

The candle flared back into life, casting golden glints across water still curled around wax.

...I did it.

Water wavered, threatening to fall.

Don't jump! It's not fire. Move smoothly. Call it.

A curl of his fingers, and water coalesced into a globe in his palm. Zuko smiled thinly, and tipped it back into the pitcher.

Then collapsed backward onto the floor of his room, stifling tired giggles. *I did it!*

Granted, compared to what he'd seen at the North Pole, it was about as impressive as one sparkler in the midst of a festival fireworks display. But it'd *worked*.

Uncle always said, if you don't know what you're doing, start small.

I wish I could tell him.

Head against wood, Zuko winced. He had to tell Iroh. Granted, they were working on the evacuation plan together, but he'd be surprised if there weren't half a dozen aspects of it the retired general had thought of and he hadn't, yet. Things that might hinge on them both being firebenders of Sozin's blood.

I have to tell him. I just - can't. Not yet.

...I'm ashamed.

Shame. Inner turmoil. Part of what Uncle thought kept him from the calm needed for lightning.

I'm ashamed to be a waterbender.

Why am I ashamed? I didn't ask for this! I didn't want it! The spirits just decided to screw with me, like they have all my life-

Because we're Sozin's children.

Sozin the hero. Sozin the conqueror. Sozin, who'd instigated a bloody massacre whose extent made Zuko sick. It was one thing to walk in the Western Air Temple a century after the bloodshed had ended. Another to have met Aang, to have hunted him across the world, and slowly realize there had once been thousands of airbenders just like him, soaring between the four corners of the earth.

How could he? How could anyone?

Zuko shivered and sat up, faintly nauseous. Just thinking about how they'd died - men, women, and children - it made him feel... ashamed.

I'm ashamed to be Sozin's heir. I'm ashamed not to be Sozin's heir.

I'm confused.

It hurts.

It ached inside, like being trapped under ice without air. His thoughts were scattered as feathers in the wind, he didn't know what to do, it wasn't *fair*-!

"Prince Zuko." Iroh's voice; one of many long-ago lessons. *"If you are lost in the wilderness, the*

first thing you must do is sit down."

Sit down. Calm down. Breathe.

The candle-flame breathed with him.

"What do you have, and what do you need?"

What he had? Was impossible-

Focus, damn it!

What he had was himself, and Uncle, and an as-yet unknown possible amount of help from the rest of the hidden folk in Ba Sing Se. What he needed-

I want to save my people.

Nice goal. Very pretty. Just the kind of thing the Avatar would get behind, if they were anybody but Fire Nation.

Aang is an idealistic idiot. What do you need, that you can do? Survival. Focus on the basics.

Breathe. Feel the heartbeat of the flame....

I need someplace some of my people can survive.

All right. Assuming he and Uncle pulled off a miracle and outwitted the spirits long enough to make this work, some *would* survive. Though it wouldn't be the Fire Nation he'd grown up in.

In the Fire Nation, Jinhai could be challenged to an Agni Kai at thirteen. I don't want that to happen. It's... wrong.

Don't think about it.

So. One small band of exiles to keep the fire alive. What would stop Earth and Water from just rolling right over them?

We'll need fortifications. And we'll have to be smart about them. Metal if we can get it. Wood if we can't. Tremor-sensors, to detect earthbenders making tunnels. Having other elements on our side would help, a lot. If the Wen family comes - earthbenders would let us build multiple lines of defense. We could even build walls meant to come down.

Breathing and flame were steady. Good.

So. How does being a waterbender affect the plan?

Assuming the people he was trying to help didn't mind waterbenders... they knew Amaya. It shouldn't be a problem. If he was trained, if he had the courage to tell Amaya and ask for her help, it could even be an asset. Diverting water made a lot of things easier. Healing would save lives.

One down. Zuko glanced at the candle, making sure nothing flammable was within yards. Now. Think. Does it matter if you're of Sozin's line? Does it matter for the plan?

Flames burst up a foot, before he could damp them again. It *hurt*.

Gripping his knees, Zuko fought the anger and grief and bewilderment back down. Like it or not,

true or not, he and Iroh had both been declared traitors to the Dragon Throne. It *didn't* matter who they were. Not anymore.

Anyone who comes, is going to come because they want to. Not because they're loyal to us.

Which would be the case with anyone who showed up later, as well. And Uncle seemed convinced people *would* show up.

Think about that. Zuko frowned. *The hidden folk here - they ran. And they made it. But they're hiding.*

We wouldn't be hiding. We're not going to be sending up fireworks, but we won't be hiding.

If people know there's somewhere else to go, if they get the idea that you can make somewhere else to go....

What would happen, if Ozai died, and some of the great names just didn't confirm their loyalty to Azula?

You'd have to have guts to pull it off. You'd have to have power, and a fortified domain, and loyal people.

There were places like that in the Fire Nation. Some of the smaller, more out of the way islands, who contributed men and weapons to the war but otherwise mostly kept to themselves. Just the kind of places that'd be most likely to survive an angry world's retribution.

If we can pull this off, we won't be alone.

None of that needed him to be Prince Zuko, son of Ozai, grandson of Azulon. They'd have a plan. Those they were trying to rescue would think it was a good idea, or they wouldn't. That was it.

He had to put his head down and just breathe. The room kept trying to spin.

It doesn't matter who I am. If the plan is good, it doesn't matter if I'm crown prince, or just... just Lee, the refugee.

Only it did matter. And not just to him.

I'm not Lee. I wish I was. Lee doesn't have orders.

Still. The Avatar wasn't here.

And if he's smart, he never will be. The army keeps attacking this place, he'd be an idiot to come here when he hasn't mastered all four elements yet....

Oh. Wait.

Zuko sighed, gripping the bridge of his nose. *He's an idiot, but Katara's got some sense. And Toph sounds pretty solid, from what Uncle said. He won't be here.*

And given that going after three master benders on his own - plus one idiot with a boomerang - was a quick way to get himself dropped in a bloodied heap somewhere... *and* given Azula was probably following the whole idealistic bunch like a vulture-wasp on a corpse-scent... no.

He was loyal. He *was*. But Azula wanted him dead, and he was not going to hand himself over gift-wrapped.

So. Simple enough. So long as he was in Ba Sing Se, he'd do what he could for his people. The Avatar would just have to wait.

I chased ghosts for almost three years. At least now, I know he's real.

A real headache. Which he was not going to think about any more tonight. He had work in the morning.

Maybe they'll forget about the bear....

Morning singing through his veins as he stood in the luxurious kennel, Zuko eyed the bear in the ridiculous green jacket and hat.

Bosco eyed him back. Shifted restlessly, muzzle starting to wrinkle in a snarl-

"Sit."

"Growf?" Blinking innocently, Bosco sat, as if it'd been his idea all along.

Hot water wrapped around his hands, Zuko ran his fingers over brown fur, paying special attention to the generous gut. So far, everything seemed to be fine. A few knots twinged at him, recalling other unwise meals. He melted those, as much as they'd let him.

Be thorough. Maybe you won't have to come back.

"It's amazing how he listens to you," the Earth King said cheerfully. "Not even one playful little nip!"

Brown bear eyes peered Zuko's way, tongue slurping in anticipation of just such a nip.

Zuko glared.

The tongue slipped back inside the mouth, as if sucked up through a straw.

Right. Behave. Or else. "You really shouldn't let him bite people."

"Muzzle his natural protective instincts?" the king said, aghast. "He's my friend!"

Your friend has enough teeth and claws to make the Unagi think twice. One of these days, somebody's going to regret that. Zuko stifled a sigh. "If we let ostrich-horses follow their natural instincts, they'd bolt every time a komodo-rhino came onto the field."

"Why would that ever be a problem?" the Earth King asked, puzzled. "Komodo-rhinos live in the Fire Nation."

"Right," Zuko said uneasily, aware of listening ears. "But what if-" *Damn, what do I say, Azula would know what to say, she got Ty Lee to believe in her- oh.* "What about traveling circuses?" he blurted out.

...Oh yeah. That really sounds plausible. Good going.

"Traveling circuses?" the Earth King said skeptically.

"Well, they have animal acts, and...." As brown brows climbed higher, Zuko sighed. "Never mind.

He's fine. Just don't let him eat anything else that's not food."

"Animal acts." The Earth King chuckled. "You're a strange young man."

You have no idea.

"Well, you may go."

"Your majesty," Zuko managed stiffly, kneeling. And retreated, as fast as was politely possible.

Hate this, hate this, hope I never have to do it again-

A green-uniformed figure fell in silently beside him. "Circuses?" Shirong said, amused.

"It could happen," Zuko said defensively. Braced himself with Lee, trying to think and act like a typical refugee.

A refugee they know can use dao. Oh, this is going to be fun.

Shirong kept walking beside the young man, enjoying the unexpected silence. Lee didn't try to explain or defend himself. He'd just offered a possible, if not very plausible, explanation - and let it drop.

Interesting young man.

Half Foggy Swamp, according to the report on the teashop brawl. Which wasn't in his official papers. But then, it seemed likely there was quite a bit about Lee, and his uncle, that wasn't in their papers.

Original hometown listed as Taku. Right.

Taku wasn't there anymore. Nothing really was, except a half-mad herbalist and that damned Pohuai Stronghold with its thrice-damned Yu Yan. Which made it the perfect place to base papers for people trying to hide something... well, possibly even worse than kin in the Foggy Swamp.

He really does have their looks. Poor kid.

Could come in handy, though. As could the waterbending. Especially given the *special situation* they had in the Upper Ring.

Avatar Kyoshi left us prepared to deal with any element. But that isn't the same as having someone who can feel it.

Granted, the *situation* was currently under control. But you could never tell what kids that age would do. And the thought of a fourteen-year-old waterbending master loose in his city gave Shirong cold chills.

Still. Lee's not an earthbender. If we're going to make exceptions, he's got to be worth it.

Well. Time to figure out how badly Lee reacted to booby-traps. Shirong lifted gloved fingers slightly, gestured-

A small cloth bag slid out of Lee's left sleeve. The teenager caught it automatically, then stopped, and turned to hold it out to him with a bow. "I didn't break any. They looked like they took time to

make."

Startled, Shirong took it, and gestured more openly. Tiny as they were, any lone bead should still respond.

Nothing. Not a whisper of earth from collar or hems. "You found them."

Lee's lone brow lifted. "Wasn't I supposed to?"

Shirong weighed the young man in his gaze, and smiled wryly. "Come with me."

He led them through walls and corridors, into one of the small rock rooms his fellow agents used for private conversations. Set the pouch down on a low table, where a long bag already rested. "How did you find them?"

"I noticed the color." Lee's face was serious, but a little quiet pride warred with the wariness in his gaze. "Then I felt something in the hem. So when I got home, I checked." He rubbed cloth between his fingers. "Water... you have to feel what you're doing. I haven't had a lot of practice, but I know that much."

And you're still not asking why, Shirong noted. You want to. I can see how badly you want to. But you know enough to be wary of us. So you're waiting, no matter how hard it is.

Wary, but not afraid. Interesting. "I'm surprised someone with your sword-skills wants to be a healer."

"Master Amaya is a good teacher," Lee said levelly. "I can waterbend. I can't get away from that. I have to learn how to control it." A sardonic snort. "Or every teashop in Ba Sing Se's going to throw me out. And my uncle loves tea."

Observant, good blade skills, and sarcastic understatement. My, my. "I'm told women from the Northern Water Tribe aren't taught combative waterbending," Shirong said levelly, taking a blue-capped scroll tube out of the bag. "That seems like a shame."

Lee stood still as ice. Only his eyes burned, green flame in a pale face.

I thought so. You're a fighter. You know what this is. And you want it. Shirong kept his gaze locked on the teenager's. *You want it, but you know there's going to be a price. And some prices are too high. You're not one to be trapped that way, are you? If what I ask is too much, if you believe it will lead to more than your soul can bear - you'll walk right out that door.*

Good. *Good.* Weak-spirited benders had no place in the Dai Li. They might be fit enough for the Outer Wall, where all they faced were human enemies. *Inside* the walls, where dissent and restless spirits roamed... you couldn't send a man ruled by his own desires up against a kamuiy. It'd be a slaughter. "Do you love this city, Lee?"

"I've only been here a few days," the teenager said quietly. Still looking at him, and not the scroll.

"But you have people you care about here," Shirong said evenly. "People you want to protect." He raised a hand for patience as the boy took a dangerous step back. "That's not a threat. I don't know who's tried to kill you in the past, besides that young idiot Jet, but I would never threaten your uncle. Family is important. Why else would we fight? Honor? Pride?" The agent shook his head. "Leave those to young fools who don't know any better. You know what's important. You protected your family, and you left a young idiot alive to learn from his mistakes." He had to chuckle. "Not only that, you made it so glaringly obvious he was wrong, he may just settle down

and become a decent citizen. Which would be best for everyone."

Lee let out a slow breath, still wary as an alley pygmy puma. "What do you want?"

"Want? I want those with the power to protect this city to have the skills they need as well."
Shirong held out the scroll. "This is a loan, not a gift. I'm going to need it back."

Lee's hand closed around it; firmly, but not too tight. "I'll show this to Master Amaya, and ask if she considers this appropriate to learn." Tucking the scroll into his kit, he bowed formally.

"You do that," Shirong said lightly, returning the bow. Escorted the young man back to the main corridors, and silently perched on a handy wall to watch him leave.

Not long after, quiet feet stopped underneath him. "Well?" Long Feng said dryly.

Smirking, Shirong dropped the bag of beads into his hands.

Long Feng hefted the rustling cloth, puzzled. Brought it near his ear, shook it, and jerked his head up to eye Shirong in amazement.

"Every. Last. One," Shirong said, with great satisfaction.

His leader frowned. "Even a skilled earthbender-"

"Could apparently learn something from paranoid fingers," Shirong shrugged.

"Hmm." The Grand Secretariat nodded. "What did you promise him?"

"Nothing."

Long Feng arched a brow.

"That boy's dealt with manipulators before, sir. Dangerous ones. One hint of a snare, he'll be gone."

"He's inside the Impenetrable City," Long Feng said dryly. "Where would he go?"

"He'd think of something." Shirong shifted against the wall, thinking. "You don't promise an abandoned pygmy puma, sir. You leave out food, and you leave the window open. And you *wait*."

"We have dozens of eager candidates," Long Feng said levelly. "Why should we wait for this one?"

"Besides the reasons you outlined before, sir?" *Waterbender. Earth Kingdom native. Already trained to be dangerous. Known family here, so it's in his interests to cooperate.* "He's not eager. Which means when he is convinced, he'll stay that way. He's inventive, tenacious, and thorough. And he knows how to discipline himself. Even when it's something he wants very badly."

Long Feng stood still, eyes half-closed as he considered that. Nodded once. "I assume by *wait*, you mean that your efforts with him will not conflict with your other duties?"

"It's unlikely they would." Shirong glanced down. "Did a report come in I should be aware of?"

"No." But Long Feng still frowned. "They claim to have been wandering for some time. If this boy is the quality we need - why hasn't the army found him before now?"

"His uncle," Shirong said levelly. "Who else is going to look after an old man with no family? I

doubt Jet's the first one to attack them."

"Hmm." The Grand Secretariat nodded. "Carry on."

The Dai Li are trying to recruit me. Heading through the busy streets of the Middle Ring's early afternoon for Jinhai's first lesson, Zuko tried - again - to make sense out of the situation. He'd seen politics and negotiations played out for as long as he'd been old enough to remember. Shirong was subtle; a lot more like Lieutenant Jee, or even Uncle, than a blustering weasel-snake like Zhao. But not subtle enough. He knew what had just happened.

It just didn't make *sense*.

The Dai Li are trying to... oh, hell. Tell Uncle - tell Amaya! - and try not to think about it. A refugee wouldn't know what just happened. Right?

He didn't know. Which was sobering and scary at once. How could people spend their whole lives not knowing the deadly dance of lords and courts?

How can I pass for normal, when I don't even know what it is?

At least one good thing had come out of the whole mess. Uncle was right. They didn't think he was Fire Nation. Shirong would never have offered that scroll to an enemy....

I'm being followed.

Zuko had grown up in cities before he'd been cast out into the wilds of the world. He knew this game.

First, match the crowd's pace.

Sometimes that was enough to throw off an unskilled pursuer. Blending with dozens of other people turned a clear target into one beast in a komodo-rhino stampede. If his tail hadn't marked *him*, specifically-

He has. Zuko glanced subtly back to catch the ripple in the crowd as someone forced their way around a knot of happily chatting wives out to market. The people between them hid who he sought, but from their glances of disapproval, and startled fear....

Male. Probably younger than they are. Probably armed.

...Oh, hell.

Ahead, the odd flutter of a noodle-shop curtain caught Zuko's eye. No one had just passed through, and the breeze from the street shouldn't push that way, which meant the breeze had to come from somewhere else- yes!

Speeding up, Zuko smiled and fell in beside another knot of women bent on acquiring dry noodles for tonight's dinner. Politely worked his way around the edge of colorful dresses as they stopped for a last-minute discussion on the merits of northern winter wheat versus southern summer. Hovered on the far side of a stately elderly matron, head down as if he wouldn't even think of cutting ahead of his elders.

And vanished down the tiny alley just beside the shop.

Hurry; any minute he'll realize you're not with them....

The alley was almost skinny enough to climb like a rock chimney. Unsure exactly how resilient his waterskin was, Zuko resisted the temptation, fingers and boots finding holds on the shop's earthbent stone wall. One floor, two, three - roof!

He swung up onto umber clay tiles, quiet feet careful not to dislodge any that might be less than securely fastened. Crept into the best shadows he could find, that would keep him hidden yet still let him look.

Even from above, the twin hook swords were unmistakable.

...Damn it.

He'd rather have been followed by Dai Li.

Not that Zuko wanted to be followed by anyone. But the Dai Li knew Amaya. They probably also knew the Wen family were long-standing patients. If her apprentice visited - well, what was odd about that?

But if Jet saw Meixiang, or Jinhai....

He was looking for Fire Nation on a secret ferry. Why wouldn't he look for them here?

Jinhai had just started bending. If Jet frightened him - there would be sparks, count on it.

I'm not going to let that happen.

Right. He'd just sneak away, circle around, leave Jet fuming in the street....

No.

Not just his own hot temper. Lee, bristling like a porcupine-boar.

I'm Amaya's apprentice. I have every right to be walking these streets. He's the one who should be skulking, not me!

Not the most cautious reaction. But sometimes the cautious plan *wasn't* the smart one.

I'm Lee. Amaya's apprentice. An Earth Kingdom waterbender. And I've done nothing wrong.

I have to act like it.

Okay. Act like an outraged, *innocent* teenager. But Jet was armed.

He's never lived in cities, Zuko thought. If you're not a great name, you don't go armed unless you're looking for trouble-

Water sloshed as he leaned back in shadow, and Zuko froze. *I am armed.*

Think it through. If you heat up the water you can firebend it, but if he still thinks we're Fire Nation, you don't want to do that. Meaning you're stuck with something you can barely use- he's coming!

Country-bred or not, it looked like Jet had finally spotted the alley. Fists clenched, he stalked in.

Loosening the cap on his water-skin, Zuko beckoned coolness around his hands. For a moment he thought the angry teenager would walk on by. But wherever he'd come from, Jet must have had some experience tracking; the freedom fighter glanced at the wall, and stiffened-

Throw!

Water snapped dead on target. Zuko yanked, and leather tore.

Clutching still-sheathed hooked swords, Zuko glared down at Jet. "Why are you following me?"

Chewing on yet another wheat straw, Jet glared back. "Maybe you didn't notice, but it's a free city."

That? Is so many kinds of wrong. "Fine." Water back in its skin, Zuko shook the swords. "Good luck ever finding these again."

"Yeah, why not?" Jet said darkly. "You kill and burn and *murder*, why not steal, too?"

"You're still-" Zuko swore under his breath, fighting the temptation to shower sparks. *Bad idea.* "Are you blind? I'm a waterbender!"

"Your uncle's not." Brown eyes narrowed at him. "I *know* what he is."

Must not kill idiot. "I already told you-"

"Your mother was from Foggy Swamp?" Jet said contemptuously. "His *brother's wife*? If he even *is* your uncle. Though I guess *that's* not a lie, no way would a *firebender* pick up some orphan who looks like the losing side of a fire duel...."

Will. Not. Kill him. The world shimmered in a red haze. He wanted to break something. Lots of things. Preferably Jet's bones-

There was a smirk tugging at Jet's mouth, as he subtly shifted stance.

He's waiting for me to come down there.

I don't think so.

The rage didn't fade. If anything, it burned hotter. But he was a firebender. He could hold fire in his bare hands, if he wanted. And he would hold his temper. Now. "You make me sick."

Jet's smirk slipped.

"A fresh start, you said. A *second chance*. And you want to harass an old man who works in a tea shop?" Zuko's eyes narrowed. "What kind of freedom fighter picks on *civilians*? There's a whole wall that needs people on it, protecting it! Protecting the *innocent people* trying to survive here! You want to fight the Fire Nation?" He jabbed a finger toward the Outer Wall, looming far in the distance. "Go fight out there!"

"And let a happy little *traitor's* family slip away?" Jet taunted, muscles tensing to spring and climb the wall. "I *don't* think-"

"Don't. *Ever*. Call my uncle a traitor again."

Eyes suddenly wary, Jet backed up a step, almost to the opposite wall.

Zuko forced himself to breathe, water curling around his hand like octopus tentacles. *I didn't call...*

never mind. Use the anger. Don't let it use you. "That's what this is all about, isn't it? I still have a family. And you don't. You *bastard*."

"What would you know about it?" Jet flung up at him. "You've never lost anything to those Fire Nation-"

"What the *hell* makes you think that?" *Don't kill him. Amaya will be disappointed if you kill him.* "I lost my parents!" Mother gone; a father that only wanted him disgraced or dead. "I lost my sister!" Maybe Azula had never been anything but evil, he didn't know. But losing Mom had sent her spiraling into Ozai's approval, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. "I lost everything I had!" *My honor. My country. My throne.*

Breathe. Move the water. Don't make it steam.

"I lost everything," Zuko said, more quietly. "Except my uncle. And you want to hurt him, too?" He stared down, pinning the brown gaze with his own. "Let me tell you something about the Water Tribes, Jet. The most important thing there is, is family. And Uncle is *mine*."

Jet's eyes shifted to dancing water. "Sure, bend your way out of trouble. You can't take me in a fair fight. And you know it."

Zuko let himself smirk, fire still blazing in his veins. "That's not going to work," he said, almost kindly. "I told you. Family. That means I don't have to fight fair." His smirk deepened, showed a faint glint of teeth. "I don't have to *fight* at all."

Jet was back against the wall, now, face slowly paling as his shoulders pressed against stone.

"Stay away from me," Zuko said, voice deadly quiet. "Stay away from my uncle." Water snaking back into the skin, he turned, and headed across the roof, leaving the swords behind.

"Or what?" Jet hurled defiantly after him.

Snorting, Zuko stepped into a blind spot formed by a chimney and a flapping line of laundry, and vanished. *You're not stupid. You figure it out.*

Though he wasn't quite sure about the *not stupid* part. For a guy who thought they were murdering Fire Nation scum, Jet seemed to be risking a lot on the assumption they'd behave like civilized people.

Maybe he'll think it through. Maybe.

For now, he'd lost the angry teen. Time to put that to good use.

A firebender. Waiting inside the front door, Suyin picked nervously at her cuffs. *Lee's a real firebender. And he's going to help.*

She wasn't quite sure how to feel about that. On the one hand, the relief was strong enough to knock her silly. She wasn't going to be alone anymore, trying to keep fires from flaring and sparks from flying. Not that she'd been totally alone, but Jia was so busy with her classes and her friends and her bending... and keeping Min from poking his nose in. Which had been a lot of help. Really.

On the other hand, some boy she didn't know was going to be teaching her little brother. Sure, Amaya vouched for him, and he'd acted a lot less blue-nosed monkey "ooh, ooh, ooh," than Min

did, but what did she really know about him? Besides the fact that he was a firebender... and he wanted her to train, too.

I'm not even a bender!

None of them had overheard what Mom and Dad said to each other, after "Professor" Dad came back from Amaya's clinic. But you could hear the tone. Some of it was angry, and some surprised, and there had been this one odd *thump* right in the middle of it all.

And her Dad had wandered out of the bedroom rubbing his head and looking *very* thoughtful. Wrong period artifact in the dig thoughtful. And Mom had come out just a little after, looking oddly sheepish and amused all at once. With her clothes a little disheveled. And not *that* way.

After which Dad had asked her, very seriously, if she would take that first lesson with Jinhai. Just to see what she thought.

Well. What she *thought* was that Min had come within a pinprick of exploding, when he'd found out Jinhai's first lesson was going to be while *he* was off at class. As if Dad and Mom couldn't handle one teenager, firebender or not.

At least Jia had been sane about the whole thing, asking Suyin to pick up any tidbits she'd miss while she was off at poetry class.

Though I'm not sure I can find out everything she wants to know, Suyin thought doubtfully. *I can ask about family, sure, and what it's like working with Amaya, but some of the other stuff-*

There was a knock at the door. Heart in her throat, Suyin peeked through the peephole.

Green. Scary green. Almost Dai Li, but there's no hat-

Lee looked up, and she felt a rush of relief. And tried not to look at the scar.

"Can I come in?"

"Y-yes, hold on...." She fumbled the door open, swallowing. Shut it after he'd silently stepped inside. "Um, we thought - the basement?" She filled her lungs, and called upstairs. "Mom, Dad! Lee's here!"

Suyin glanced back in time to see Lee take his hands away from his ears. "You're going to do fine on the breathing lessons," he said dryly.

"Thanks?" Was that a compliment? Didn't sound like one. But it didn't sound mean, either. Weird.

Her parents came down with Jinhai between them, and Suyin saw the moment Jinhai saw Lee. Her little brother just lit up, eyes wide and bright and hopeful as if Mom had come home after a long day dealing with other professors' wives.

Lee caught the flying little boy as he was hugged, looking stunned as if he'd just been slugged. "Is something wrong?"

"You came! You really came!" Jinhai pulled back enough to look up, bright green eyes doubtful as he chewed on his lip. "You kind of felt like a spirit-story. I didn't know if you were really *real*."

"I'm real," Lee said quietly. Looked up at her parents. "Professor. Madam."

"Downstairs would be wise," her father said plainly. "Shall we?"

Suyin pulled the new cellar door shut after them, wondering how long this one would last. And just what Lee had done, to break rock the way she'd thought only an earthbender could. That would be so cool....

Keep dreaming. Not a bender, remember? Suyin sat down by the old futon her mother had dragged into the cellar. *Just listen, and pay attention. It's not like you're going to get anything out of this except a way to help Jinhai....*

"The first thing you need to know," Lee interrupted her thoughts, setting up a semicircle of five unlit candles in front of where he sat, "is that everybody has chi, and everybody can learn to move it."

Wait. What?

"Chi's what Amaya uses to fix people, right?" Jinhai bounced as Lee sat him down.

"Yes," Lee nodded. "It's what all benders use to affect their element. And fighters use it, too. Though I guess a lot of them here don't know that's what they're doing. A warrior who *does* know is an incredible fighter. Years ago, Master Piandao of Shu Jing resigned from the army and retired. Somebody decided they wanted him back, and they sent a hundred soldiers to convince him. He defeated them all." Lee had a slight, wry smile as he looked at her parents. "He's a swordsman. Not a bender."

"And you've actually met this legend?" her father said doubtfully.

"I did," Lee acknowledged. "A long time ago." The teenager looked down, smile rueful. "I kind of hope he doesn't remember. I was a little brat." He poked Jinhai gently in the shoulder. "Even younger than you."

Jinhai eyed him. "I'm not a brat!"

"You sure? I was at your age." Lee shrugged. "Just remember, everybody has chi. People who aren't benders have to work hard to learn to move it, but they can. And that's how you learn to-" Lee glanced at her parents again, and colored slightly. "Sorry. I thought the door was stronger than that."

"Wow!" Jinhai breathed.

Suyin picked her jaw up off the floor. "I - could learn to do *that*?"

"If you practice." Lee nodded. "It takes years. I've been training since I was four."

"Four? We don't start self-defense in school until-" Meixiang froze suddenly, eyes wide. "...My lord."

"No!" Lee's unscarred eye was almost as wide, and his face paled. "No, please. I'm no one's lord." He looked down, dark hair not long enough to hide pain. "Not anymore."

Lord? Suyin thought, aghast. *Lee's a noble?* He wasn't anything like the snooty brats from the Upper Ring. She'd met enough to know.

"Mommy?" Jinhai looked between them, worried.

"It's complicated, love." Meixiang smiled at him. "But if you're ever in trouble and you can't find us - find Lee. He'll look after you. That's what families like his do."

Lee swallowed dryly. "I am honored by your trust."

"I'm going to have to talk with Huojin," Meixiang said ruefully. "He's probably jumpy as a rabbiroo, with no idea why."

"Huh?" Lee said, confused.

"Later," she said firmly. Made a shooing motion. "Go on."

"Okay," Lee said warily. Looked at Suyin and Jinhai, drawing them in with his gaze. "Meditation teaches concentration and focus. And in firebending, chi comes from the breath. So we're going to start with a breathing meditation."

"We're going to breathe?" Jinhai said, dismayed. "I do that all the time!"

"Oh really?" Lee gave him a wink, and pinched a candle wick-

It puffed into flame.

Suyin held onto her jaw this time, as Lee pinched the rest of the candles alight. They were small flames. Ordinary, compared to the whispered horror stories of fireballs that could take a man's face off, or flame-daggers that seared armor and heart to the same black char. But the casual way he'd done it....

Like Dad, skating aside just enough dirt to uncover a site layer. Just - precise.

Lee sat up straight, in a formal meditative pose. Not too different from the ones she'd seen her father use, though Lee's hands rested on his knees instead of clasped together in front of him. "Can you breathe like this?" Slow and steady, Lee breathed in through his nose, and out through his mouth. Quietly. Almost soundlessly.

And the flames breathed with him.

"So... where's *my* candle?" Jinhai asked.

If she weren't focused on breathing, Suyin would have smacked herself in the forehead.

"You get one when your parents and I say you're ready," Lee said levelly. "Breathe. No, sit up more. Straight. Your mind's busy a lot, and that makes you more nervous, which is not good for fire. We're trying to calm everything down. In through your nose, out through your mouth...."

It was the most exhausting fifteen minutes Suyin had ever breathed. She wasn't sure what was more impressive; that Lee kept nudging Jinhai back to work without ever losing his temper-

Or that the candles never wavered, keeping Lee's rhythm.

"This is *hard*," Jinhai complained, breathless.

"Yes, it is." A swift exhalation, and all the candles went out at once. "Ask your father what it takes to learn earthbending as well as he has. This *is* hard. And it takes time to learn." Lee stood and stretched, then dropped back into a crouch to look Jinhai in the eye. "But you want to make sure no one gets burned again, right?"

"...Yeah." Jinhai stretched out his legs, and slid a glance at Lee's face, curious and a little scared. "Is that what happened to you?"

For a moment, Lee went very still. Let out a slow, controlled breath. "That's... complicated. Grownup stuff." He looked into the distance, seeing somewhere else. "Firebenders can get focused on a goal and not think things through. Sometimes that's a good thing. A lot of times, though, it can get you in really big trouble." Lee smiled wryly. "That's one of the reasons we meditate. So you can clear all the noise out of your head, and *think*. Because fire doesn't want to think. It attacks. It burns. It's *never* patient. So you have to think twice as hard, to stay out of trouble." His smile gentled. "That's one of the reasons we love our parents so much. If the fire gets too hot, they pick us up by the scruff of the neck and haul us back."

"Because firebenders are bad," Jinhai whispered, eyes downcast.

"Who told you-?" Lee's eyes went hard for a moment. He shook it off. Traded a glance with Suyin's parents, who looked both angry and stricken, Meixiang's hand covering her mouth.

"You're not bad," Suyin said firmly. "You're my little brother. You just don't know what you're doing yet. Remember Mom's stories about Min on the roof when he was little? He got up there and started bending the tiles all over the place. It took Dad *hours* to put everything back."

"But he was scared of me." Jinhai's eyes were wet; she could see him holding back a snuffle.

"I don't like boulders flying my way, either," Lee said dryly. "He'll learn to live with it."

Jinhai did snuffle, and Suyin held back a sigh. Sure, her little brother had reasons to be upset, but this wasn't going to help!

"Want to see something neat?" Lee offered, pinching a candle back to life. "You know, there's a reason Amaya's teaching me."

Halfway to crying, Jinhai looked at him suspiciously. Blinked, and almost backed into Suyin, as Lee's circling hands blazed candle-flame to gold and green that wreathed his hands like-

Like Amaya's water, Suyin realized, stunned.

"You can touch this," Lee said quietly, glancing at them both. "It doesn't burn."

Spellbound, she reached out with Jinhai.

It was *warm*.

It tickled a little, like Amaya's water; poking at her to see if anything needed fixing. Beyond that it didn't feel like anything, except snuggling up in blankets on a cold morning. Just - warm. "You're a *healer*," Suyin blurted out. "How? I never heard of-" She cut herself off, not wanting to fill Jinhai's ears with what she *had* heard.

"My mother had a secret," Lee admitted. "I didn't figure it out until a few weeks ago." He let the fire flicker back to the candle, fading to ordinary hot yellow. "Fire's not bad, Jinhai. It's what you do with it that matters." He stood, and waved them both up. "Now, we work on falling."

Professor Tingzhe coughed quietly. "I believe you were going to cover dousing fire?"

"I am," Lee stated. "It's connected. You shift how you fall, so you don't get hurt. And that's part of how you shift a flame's energy, so it goes out."

"A bit counterintuitive," Tingzhe mused. "I'm used to impact being used to break things... though I suppose this would be breaking a fire's energies." He inclined his head.

Lee nodded back, and glanced at the two younger children. "Like this. Watch." Quick as that, he tipped over onto the futon, landing with a soft *thump* before he curled back onto his feet, light as a cat-owl. "See?"

Jinhai stared. "Erk?" Suyin managed.

"Don't worry. I'm here to catch you."

Over and over they fell, until Suyin thought she was too breathless to move. But she wasn't, quite; Lee had her fall twice more, before nodding her off the futon, and sitting Jinhai down by the candle. "Now we try the tricky part. Breathe. Feel your heartbeat." He waited for her brother's shy nod. "Reach out. Not with your hands, with your feelings. Reach for the flame. It's like a little heartbeat. Feel it?"

"Wow," Jinhai breathed.

This, I can't do, Suyin thought wistfully, watching. Had the flame flickered when Jinhai focused on it? She couldn't be sure.

"Do what I do." Lee reached out a hand, holding it flat and level. Jinhai mimicked him, glancing at Lee's calm face. "Now," Lee said quietly, "Push down. Just like pushing your fall into the futon, so it doesn't hurt. Down, and out."

"But it's alive!" Jinhai dropped his hand, horrified. "No! I won't hurt it!"

"Jinhai!" Lee's voice didn't snap, but it cut through panic like a knife. "You can *always* light another fire."

"B-but-"

"Fire is everywhere. Lamps. Candles. Stoves. All kinds of places. There are lots of fires. But you only have *one* Mom. One Dad. Jia, Min, Suyin - they can't stop a fire if it gets out of control! You can. You *have* to." Lee stared at her little brother, deadly serious. "I know it hurts. I know you don't want to. But that's what being responsible is. Sometimes, we have to do things we don't want to, because our family *needs* us." He rested a hand on Jinhai's shoulder. "Do you understand?"

"...I guess so," Jinhai whispered.

"Good. Now follow me." Lee held out his hand again. "Down... and *out*."

The flame flickered. Guttered. Snuffed, a wisp of gray smoke snaking upward.

Jinhai burst into tears.

"Good," Lee said firmly. Glanced up, and beckoned Meixiang over anxiously. "That's good, Jinhai. That's *just* what you needed to do." He backed off, letting a worried mother gather up her son and tell him how brave and smart he was. Leaned back against a cellar wall, running a shaking hand through damp black hair. "Oh, am I glad that's over...."

Suyin didn't grab Lee by the throat, but she glared hard enough to clue him in that she *wanted* to. "Professor" Dad was looming up behind her, and that was enough to scare any teenage boy with sense. "Why's my brother crying?"

"It hurts to stop a fire." Lee looked between them both, tired and serious. "Part of it's the bending. Your energy's in the flame, and when you start out, you can't pull it back fast enough not to hurt."

But part of it's... spirits. We *love* fire, Suyin. Killing it's like - like cutting yourself open. It feels *wrong*." He took a deep breath, let it out. "But we all learn to put fires out. We *have* to."

Tingzhe studied him a long moment, and nodded. "Can you come again tomorrow?"

"I already asked Master Amaya," Lee stated. "Yes."

"And it is real pain?" Tingzhe raised a gray brow.

Lee winced, and snatched the candle off the floor. "Sorry... I'm not used to being able to help - hold this?"

Startled, Suyin gripped the re-lit candle, bringing it over as Lee stroked that odd fire over Jinhai, dimming sobs to hiccups. "You know what really helps?" Lee said, fire flickering out. "We should go get some sunlight."

Chapter 13

"Is that normal?" Meixiang asked quietly.

Zuko watched Jinhai sleep in a curled lump in Meixiang's small garden, breathing easily. "Fire's not like the other elements. It comes from inside you. You have to build up your strength. My bending showed up late, too. I needed a *lot* of naps." Which had made him very cranky. Naps were for little kids. Thank the spirits his mother had a sense of humor.

He glanced over the faces of two worried parents, and a sister whose protective bearing reminded him so much of Lu Ten, it hurt. "One good thing about being a firebender. We don't sunburn easily." Which had been lifesaving when they'd been floating on the raft with little shelter-

"I guess that's another thing you have to watch out for," Zuko sighed. So many little details. So many ways to get caught.

And that's when someone's not looking for Fire Nation. I have to tell them.

"I meant to get here earlier," Zuko said levelly. "I wasn't, because I had to lose someone." He held up a hand. "Goes by Jet. He's about this tall. Messy brown hair, brown eyes. Hook swords. Chews on a wheat straw, all the time. He saw my uncle and I on the ferry to Ba Sing Se, and he's sure we're firebenders. Well, that Uncle is," Zuko amended. "I've pretty much got him convinced I'm a waterbender."

"How?" Suyin asked, while her parents were still sputtering.

"We were in a teashop. I hit him with a bunch of hot water," Zuko answered, sheepishly avoiding parts of the truth. "Healing means moving fire in ways most benders don't try. I can move fire inside hot water. It's kind of neat."

"Inventive," Tingzhe said, stunned, as Meixiang *stared* at him. "Have you tried this with anything else? Earth, perhaps?"

"Not yet," Zuko managed, shaken by the sudden possibilities. "Sand might work... it works in water because water flows, like heat...."

Air flows, too.

Agni. I've got to try it.

Just once, just *once*, he'd like Aang to know what it felt like to be blown through a building. A little humility would lengthen the Avatar's lifespan.

"Thank you," Zuko said, and meant it. "I'll try that. Later. But you have to watch out for this moron. He's dangerous. Uncle's been acting like an old civilian, and Jet still went after him. If he thought he knew about Jinhai...." Zuko looked Suyin in the eye, deadly serious. "He doesn't care who he hurts, to get back at the Fire Nation. Don't face him. Just run."

"But you did lose him?" Meixiang asked, visibly reining in fear with determination.

"I've had practice," Zuko admitted. "Now that I know he's still looking, I'll be more careful. I won't lead him to you." He met her gaze squarely. "Can you warn people? Huojin already knows about Jet, and I'm going to tell Amaya, but I want to make sure everyone gets word."

"I will." Meixiang inclined her head, almost a bow.

Zuko winced. "Don't do that. Please."

She eyed him, one black brow lifted. "My lord, even if you chose to leave, you can't abandon what you were born-"

"I didn't choose to leave!" *Say it. Just- get it out.* "I'm an *exile*, Meixiang. I was banished." Fists clenched, nails denting skin. *No fire. Not here.* "If you want a lord, look for someone with honor." *I lost mine. Lost everything....*

But I won't let you lose what you love. I can do that much. I will.

"You lost an Agni Kai," Meixiang said at last.

Obvious, isn't it? "I didn't even fight," Zuko got out. "How could I? He was-" *my father* "-someone I owed loyalty to. I *couldn't*."

"An Agni what?" Tingzhe asked warily.

"A fire duel," Meixiang said plainly. "We're children of dragons, Tingzhe. Sometimes the only way to settle things is with a fight."

"And the Fire Nation calls itself civilized?" her husband said incredulously. "When we have disagreements here-"

"You argue, and shout at each other, and start whispering campaigns that can go on for generations?" Meixiang said pointedly. "When an Agni Kai's over, it's *over*. Decided. Done. And everyone's loyalty is satisfied. You've risked your life for what you believe is right. No lord can ask for more than that." She looked back at Zuko. "But you couldn't have been more than a child."

"I was thirteen." He couldn't help but glance at Suyin. "That's old enough."

The girl swallowed dryly. "Is - is that why you're training me?"

"No," Zuko said, incredulous. *How could she even think - Earth Kingdom. She doesn't know.*

"That's self-defense. You have to be a firebender for an Agni Kai. Honor duels for non-benders are blade fights. I mean, you could learn swords, if you wanted to." He caught Tingzhe's stern look, and tried to shrug. "I know, spears and throwing knives are more traditional, but I'm lousy with them...."

Tingzhe's eyes darkened further. The earthbender cracked his knuckles.

"Don't threaten him just for the truth, love," Meixiang said, amused. "Dragon's children. But we don't have fangs and claws. We have to settle for steel and fire." She eyed Zuko again. "But thirteen? What happened?"

Zuko froze. *I can't tell them. I can't.*

He'd never told anyone about that day. Not even Uncle. And Iroh had been *there*.

She's got this crazy idea I'm still a lord. I can't let her believe that. We're going to make it so they can get out of the city. If she wants someone to be loyal to... she has to find someone better.

I have to tell her something.

"I should have listened to Uncle, and kept my mouth shut," Zuko said at last. "I should have stayed out of the war room. But I thought I had responsibilities to learn about... it was a bad idea." He took a breath, trying not to feel. "One of the gen- one of the commanders was planning to gain a tactical advantage by sending new recruits up against trained earthbenders. To lure them out into the open. I said we couldn't do that to our people." He would *not* touch the scar. "He challenged. I should have backed down. But I wasn't afraid. Not of him." Zuko tried to shrug, and failed. "I can be really, really stupid, sometimes."

"Yes, well," Tingzhe said uncomfortably. "You can't always judge a bender's skill by his looks."

"No." A bare whisper, but Zuko got it out. "No, when I turned around... it wasn't him." *Don't shake. Not now. It's over. It's been over for years.*

"That's dishonorable!" Meixiang's own hands were fists, white-knuckled. "Your family should have blocked the duel from proceeding! They should have protested, even to the Fire Lord's ears-"

It wasn't funny. Not even close. So why was he laughing? Laughing to the point it hurt, and he had to lean against the house wall, tears running down his face.

Don't wake up Jinhai. He shouldn't see this.

Dragging in a sobbing breath, Zuko shoved the pain back into that dark corner of his mind. "It wouldn't have worked," he managed raggedly. "The Fire Lord has a thing about *respect*."

Dashing away tears, he straightened. "Uncle took care of me after - after. So I didn't die. The first day I could get out of bed-" He remembered the crinkle of the decree in Azula's hands. Her smirk, knowing and cruel, as he read through the terms. Uncle's face, finding her there; a grim puzzlement that changed to cold fury as she skipped away down the hall, humming.

Don't think about it.

"Uncle went with me," Zuko said simply. "He didn't have to. He's never been banished. I'd be dead a dozen times without him." He looked at Meixiang, and shook his head. "Find someone else."

Put the pain away. Focus. Survive.

Outwardly calm, Zuko bowed to the professor. "I promised Master Amaya I'd be at the clinic for the evening hours. I'll be back tomorrow."

He headed out through the house, and didn't look back.

He looks like death warmed over.

Amaya steered her dazed apprentice out of the waiting room, past curious patients. "Where are you hurt?" she asked in an undertone.

"I'm not injured." Lee bristled at her look of disbelief; even his irritation looked weary. "Just tired. Jinhai's parents had questions. Some of them were hard to answer. I ran into Jet again, he's *still* after Uncle; lost him in an alley, hope he starts thinking before I have to hurt him. And - one of the people around Bosco loaned me this." Face almost blank, he handed over a blue-capped scroll.

A waterbending scroll.

"I'm not injured," he repeated flatly, as she glanced up at him. He swallowed, fingers clenching. "I can work."

I don't want to think, Amaya could all but hear the silent plea. Please, give me something to do.

"Start with Nin," she sighed. "He's managed to twist his back again. You'll work on minor healing, and you'll stop when I say."

A subdued nod. "Yes, Master Amaya."

This is going to be a long afternoon.

So this is what we've got to work with.

Disguised in civilian clothes, rock gloves tucked up his sleeves, Shirong watched the class of university earthbending students in their stone-walled practice yard. Most were fair. A few were excellent, the kind who'd end up specialists on the Wall or architects and delicate stoneworkers in the city itself. But of all the students here, only one had the drive, the killer instinct, to potentially become Dai Li.

Min Wen.

Paired against an older teenager, Min split his wall of stone with a slice of his hand and punched the fragment against his opponent. The older boy stamped another wall up in time to take the blow, but both rocks shattered.

Skill is there. And he's fast enough. We could certainly train him to our level.

But to be honest with himself - and having seen the spirits he'd seen, Shirong tried *very* hard to be honest with himself - it wasn't earthbending skill that worried him.

Professor Wen's son.

Problematic, right there. Tingzhe Wen certainly acted like a man still living in Avatar Kyoshi's era, but there was nothing wrong with the man's mind. He knew enough to know what he shouldn't talk about, but some of his students hadn't been so wise.

A good teacher loved his students, and Tingzhe Wen was a very good teacher. One day that might outweigh his prudence. Could Min Wen deal with being one of those who might have to make his own father disappear?

And if he can - do we want that kind of recruit?

There were other reasons to be wary of the boy. Harder for Shirong to pin down, but real nonetheless.

He's too eager.

Burning with zeal, like a flame loosed on flash-paper. If the Dai Li weren't all he'd dreamed, if the hard reality of their dirty work to keep Ba Sing Se stable fell short of what Min aspired to... who could say he wouldn't be as quick to turn that zeal toward something else?

Still. Feelings, no matter how trained and tested, weren't reason enough to deny the boy a chance. They *needed* new recruits. Or Quan and the Grand Secretariat wouldn't even consider Lee.

And that would be a damn shame.

Min Wen had never faced death. Lee had, and dealt it; you could see it in his eyes, whenever the young man forgot to play innocent. Yet Lee still cared about people. Even if he thought most of them were flighty and annoying.

Frankly, the Earth King was flighty and annoying. But he was the hereditary ruler of Ba Sing Se, Shirong had a duty, and that was that.

Another point in his favor. Lee understands duty.

Duty or not, Shirong would never have wanted to do *that* to Bosco. Lee had hesitated, examined the bear to see if there were any other way to get at the obstruction short of cutting the creature open... then grimaced, and did what had to be done.

I like him.

Shirong raised an eyebrow at that thought, turning it over carefully. He'd survived two decades in the Dai Li's ranks. You didn't last that long without paying attention to the chill down your neck that told you when spirits were about to drop the mother of all landslides on top of you.

Lee felt... warm. Strong. Safe, in the way wearing his rock gloves and working with a tested agent felt safe.

If we were backed against a wall, he'd fight.

Though all things considered, the healing was an even more critical asset. Every year the Avatar had been missing, the spirits had grown more ill-tempered; more ready to lash out at humans for the smallest infraction. That wasn't superstition, it was fact. You could track the increasing assaults in Dai Li records, the lists of people gone fey and strange-

Lee's fought a spirit.

If he'd been alone, Shirong might have indulged in a smack to the forehead. As it was he only winced, and wondered why he hadn't pinned that down before.

He was playing innocent. Pretty well, too.

But it was clear enough, once Shirong had pinned down that feeling of safety and strength. People who'd met the spirit world, who'd *dealt* with it - there was a *presence* to them. A feeling of *elsewhere*, that went beyond even the strength of a bender.

It's not just our uniform that frightens people.

No wonder Lee could look him in the eye without flinching. The otherness was already in him, setting him apart from those who lived quiet, ordinary lives.

You poor kid. I hope you do make it with us. You're never going to fit in with normal people again.

Though healer was a good second choice. Amaya was spirit-touched, too. No one expected a waterbending healer to be normal.

Wonder if you've figured that out yet?

If Lee hadn't, Shirong might just point it out to him. If he really wasn't interested in being Dai Li. A waterbending healer on call was no small asset.

Decided, Shirong turned his full attention back to Min as the teen almost literally crushed his next opponent under a mini-pile of rubble. *Ouch.*

Which was when four bruised and dusty former opponents all decided they'd had enough, and literally boxed Min in.

Tch, tch. You forgot the top.

A fact Min made swift use of, soaring up on a spike of earth before kicking the four walls back to their creators. But now more students were advancing, plus one of the instructors....

Grinning, Shirong leaned back to watch the show.

Dad's in his study, Min's still eating dust at school, Jia's got Jinhai on pain of no nights out with her girlfriends if she lets him down here while Mom's cooking. Best chance I'm going to get.

"Mom?" Suyin said quietly, standing at the edge of the kitchen as her mother chopped vegetables. "What did Lee mean about finding another lord?"

It was the best question she could think of. The only one, about that whole awful scene in the garden, that wouldn't just get a "you're too young to know" from her parents. She hoped.

Meixiang looked at her sadly, the way she'd looked after Lee had fled. Her brows drew down, and she nodded, determined. "Would you peel the potato-chokes?"

"Yes, ma'am," Suyin said hurriedly, picking up a bristle-brush to scrub the pot of tubers. Studying each before it went under her brush, putting aside three that had enough sprouts to be worth planting. 'Choke flowers were pretty, and fresh young tubers in the fall, with a little butter, were about the best breakfast ever.

"I don't want to tell Jinhai about this until he's older," her mother began. "He can keep training a secret, I hope, but stories of spirits and dragons... well, what child is going to keep that from his playmates? But you're old enough to know."

"What do lords have to do with spirits and dragons?" Suyin asked, still scrubbing.

"Oma and Shu were the first earthbenders, but they were human. It's said the first firebenders were the children of a bright, brave lady, who appeared to her lord when he was on the brink of death, and the sun shone through the rain. She nursed him back to life, fought by his side, and raised their children." Meixiang paused. "And when her lord died, she turned back into a dragon, and flew away."

The 'choke didn't quite slip out of Suyin's hands, but she was glad she hadn't yet picked up a knife. "She was a *dragon*?"

"Not the only one in our history," Meixiang said plainly. "Many of our greatest heroes, and blackest villains, are said to have had dragon's blood. You can check the genealogies. There are names that come from nowhere, raise children, and vanish. Vanish, not die." She paused, and shook her head. "Or you could have checked them. Fire Lord Sozin outlawed all mention of such people, when he started the hunting of dragons."

Made sense. In a weird kind of way. You wouldn't want to try to get people to hunt down their... relatives. "Do we have-?" Suyin couldn't quite say it.

"We do," her mother nodded. "Your little brother would be proof enough, if I hadn't heard my grandfather's stories." Meixiang regarded her, concerned. "It's nothing to be ashamed of. But it makes us different. We need lords. Dragons... they don't negotiate. One dragon is in charge of one territory, and all the others who live there bow to him. Or her. Or there's a fight, until the loser leaves or submits. Or so the tales say."

Like the pygmy pumas Suyin had watched on the roofs sometimes, snarling and posturing and, once in a while, dissolving into teeth and claws. Which might draw blood, but usually didn't *kill* anybody.

Like an Agni Kai?

"So," Suyin said, trying to piece it together. "If there weren't lords - people would be fighting all the time?"

"My grandfather read stories written by his several times great-grandfather, about a time when the Fire Nation was all warring clans and pirates," Meixiang nodded. "Ask your father about it. He knows more about the reign of the forty-sixth Earth King than any of us."

Good idea. "But you don't have to fight anybody," Suyin objected.

Meixiang hesitated, and sighed. "Suyin. Do you know why Jinhai - your quiet, *shy* little brother - hugged a boy he'd only seen once?"

"Well, I..." Suyin's voice trailed off, as she thought about that. It made sense. Didn't it? Why *wouldn't* Jinhai trust Lee? Lee was-

Suyin jerked her head up to meet her mother's gaze. "Lee feels... safe." And that didn't make sense. It didn't make sense at all.

"Oh," Meixiang whispered. Put her knife down, and reached over to hug her daughter close. "Oh, my brave little girl. I didn't know."

"Mom?" Why did her heart feel all fluttery, like this was scary and important as Mom telling her about being alone with boys and why not to do *anything* unless you had dragged him home to meet armed parents first?

"The strongest dragon rules, but he also protects." Meixiang's gaze searched hers. "Fire is *loyal*. All its children are. First to your parents, and then to your family. After that, your loyalty is your choice. Be careful who you give it to. Breaking it will break your heart." She looked down, pale and worried. "For a firebender... breaking it kills them."

That sounds crazy. But it wasn't. Suyin could feel it wasn't. She'd rather die than hurt her parents, her brothers, her sister. Wasn't that why she'd fought so hard to keep Jinhai hidden? She'd rather die-

Or kill.

The thought had been there, gnawing, ever since Lee told them about Jet. That's what a pygmy puma did, when something went after her kittens. She'd hiss and slash claws and try everything else first. But if that didn't work....

"Mommy," Suyin whispered, and clung to her.

"I know, sweeting. I know." Meixiang rocked her gently, stroking her hair. "That's why I want you

to pay attention to your lessons with Lee. Because if some *bastard* comes after you, or any of us - I want you to be the one who walks away. Maim him if you have to. *Kill* him if you have to. *Live*." Another hug. "And remember what I told Jinhai. If there's trouble, real trouble - find Lee, or his uncle. They're great names. They *will* protect you."

"Lee's lord didn't protect him," Suyin sniffled.

"That should never have happened," Meixiang said sadly. "The good lords are loyal to their people, even children not old enough to-" She froze.

"Mom?" Suyin whispered.

"Oh, spirits," Meixiang breathed. "That poor boy. No wonder he doesn't think he's...." She let out a slow breath, and let go. "Suyin, can you finish these? I need to talk with your father."

Suyin nodded. "About Lee?"

"About something I hoped I'd never have to study again," Meixiang said, half to herself. "Politics."

The knock on his door wasn't unexpected. Just a bit early. Tingzhe sighed, and put down a mostly untouched glass of wine. "Come in."

Meixiang saw what he had spread out on the desk, and closed the door before she shook her head. "You know what they could do to you, if they catch you with those."

"Bai's gone," Tingzhe said sadly, ruffling through his former student's notes. "This is all I have left of him." He shrugged, and offered her a wry smile. "Besides. Everyone knows I have no interest in current events. Why would anything like these be here?"

"You sly deceiver." Meixiang's smile lit her face, warming his heart all over again. "I'd match you against the Face-Stealer any day."

"I hope not," Tingzhe chuckled. Let his expression turn serious again. "What is it?"

"Lee's Agni Kai." Meixiang winced. "It was his father."

Ah. That fit, unfortunately. "How do you know?"

"He was thirteen. He couldn't owe loyalty to anyone but his family. His uncle's here. And the way he talks about his mother? It couldn't have been her."

Spirits, that possibility hadn't even occurred to him. What sort of land taught mothers to fight?

The kind that maims and exiles a boy at thirteen.

No. He couldn't blame the land for that. The Fire Lord, certainly.

I wonder if Lee ever has.

Meixiang was frowning at him, tapping a finger against her hip. "You're not surprised."

That was his wife. Clear-sighted as a messenger hawk. "I believe I know who he is," Tingzhe said simply.

Meixiang looked at the wine he ordinarily wouldn't touch until after dinner. "It's that bad?"

"No," Tingzhe said thoughtfully, "it's worse." He sighed. "Mind you, this is only an educated guess. The circumstances under which the boy in question was scarred were apparently not common knowledge. But the timing fits. Unless the Fire Lord banished some other great name's son that year, and Bai never had a chance to find out. This is one of the last fragments he found, before... well." Still. That laughter. Awful, soul-shredding; as if the boy had only just realized how obscenely unjust the universe had been.

"Tingzhe." Meixiang gave him a sober look. "Why don't you just tell me?"

"Because you can't not know, once you know," Tingzhe said bluntly. Hesitated, and told the truth. "And... I don't know what will happen. You called him *my lord*." He dropped his head, ashamed. "I don't want to lose you."

"Oh, Tingzhe." She took his hands between hers, kneading earth-worn fingers. "I'm your wife. You and the children always come first." She gave him a smile of quiet mischief. "Why do you think we train girls to fight? So when husbands or brothers do something stupid, they can protect the children. No matter what their lords do." Her voice dropped. "I love you. No lord can change that."

I love you, too. I have to trust you. "Not even this one?"

Meixiang read Bai's notes. Stopped. Reread them, slowly.

Reached past him, and slugged good wine down like water.

"Precisely," Tingzhe said dryly.

She let out a slow breath. "He said he was here with his *uncle*."

"If Bai was right, he only has the one," Tingzhe said wryly. "I must admit, the thought of that man inside these walls turns my spine to water. What on earth is he planning?"

"He's not," Meixiang said after a long moment. "They're hiding. Just like the rest of us."

Tingzhe gave her a skeptical look.

"They came to Amaya, love. A man in his position... he wouldn't be here if there were any hope left for them in the Fire Nation."

"A man in his position is far more likely to be carrying out a long-reaching plot-"

"Here? Alone? With only Lee? Hiding with a waterbender's help?" Meixiang studied him, and shook her head. "What's more likely? A plot? Or a man trying to save his nephew by coming to the only place in the world they can hide?"

Tingzhe sighed. "Lee said he'd done things he wasn't proud of." *The commander of the ship, indeed.* "It's only...how can that man's son be the young man we let into our home?" *He was gentle with Jinhai. Kind. Not an implacable enemy. Not a monster.* "How could any man do that to his own son?"

"We could ask his brother."

Tingzhe eyed his wife suspiciously. "You're not serious."

"Why not?" Meixiang looked almost impish. "We're having Huojin, Luli, and their girls over next

week anyway. Why not invite them, too? Lee will be busy with Jinhai and Suyin, and Lim and Daiyu, and probably fending off Jia, and getting glared at by Min. We'll have plenty of time to corner his uncle and... talk."

"I'd rather corner an enraged dillo-lion," Tingzhe muttered.

"That's why we need to plan this, dear."

"Ah, yes. A plan." Tingzhe nodded. "I'm doomed."

"Here." Amaya set a steaming cup in front of her apprentice, grateful for the quiet as the last regular patients walked away from her door. She'd unlock the front if there was an emergency, but for now, they were alone. "I know you're not fond of tea, and this is good for someone who's had a bad day."

Lee sniffed it first. Brightened a little, like a shaft of sun through rain, before taking a hot sip. "You have limons?"

"Some trade goes through, even these days," Amaya nodded, relaxing a little. Honey and limon in hot water eased a multitude of heartaches. "They're one thing I would miss, if I ever lost my mind and went back to the tribe."

"You don't miss your people?"

"I do," Amaya admitted. "But for decades they've been waiting for something that never happened." *The Avatar to be born into the Northern Water Tribe.*

It was a reasonable assumption. The Air Nomads were dead, and no one had seen the Avatar. Why shouldn't he have been killed, and reborn? She'd seen the shamans of her tribe testing child after child, to no avail.

She was a bender, and a woman, and not the Avatar. Meaning her parents would likely accept her betrothal to the first strong bender who offered. Master Pakku had been on their list of candidates; he'd been mourning Kanna as lost for years, surely he was ready to look for another bride.

But that hadn't been quite enough to push her into leaving. No; that decision had come from what she'd overheard, inadvertently eavesdropping on one of the shaman's tests.

Find the Avatar. Train him.

Destroy the Fire Nation.

Defeat the Fire Nation, certainly. But destroy it? Break the cycle of elements further, just for revenge? She wouldn't be part of that. She couldn't. There had to be another way.

"I miss them," Amaya admitted now. "But I needed an answer I couldn't find at the North Pole. So I left." She smiled, recalling a giant webbed claw, a face both kind and terrible. "The answer I found gave me many more questions, but it's made my life interesting." She tapped the scroll. "As is this. It must be at least two centuries old... you say a Dai Li gave it to you?"

"*Loaned* it," Lee stressed. "I think he's trying to recruit me."

Amaya considered that impossible statement. Shook her head. Thought it through again. "Spirits.

Why?"

"I don't know. I'm going to ask Uncle." Lee frowned. "I told him I'd need your permission to learn what's on here." He paused. "Are you going to try the forms? He said your tribe doesn't teach women benders to fight, which is one of the silliest things I've ever- um." He visibly bit his lip. "What I mean is, I don't know waterbending, but I know combat forms. I could help. If you wanted."

Amaya's brows climbed, taking in those shy hints of interest. "You want to try these." Which made no sense, except- "You think you could approximate the forms with boiling water?"

"...Maybe?" Lee said awkwardly.

Hmm. Not all the truth. But there was life in his gaze, where before there had been weary horror.

Decided, Amaya unrolled the scroll. "Let's have a look." Hmm. The water whip, circling waves, breath of ice-

"You have a breathing form?" Lee looked downright *interested*.

"Not one I think you could fake," Amaya pointed out.

"Not with firebending," Lee admitted. "But I wonder if that's what gave Uncle the idea."

"What idea?" Amaya asked warily. Mushi was a good man, from what she'd seen. Not bad looking, either, if a bit pale. But given his ideas had already landed a healing firebender in her clinic- well.

Lee got up from the table, took a few steps back. Breathed deep. And breathed out licks of flame.

Amaya tried not to stare.

"It's good for staying warm," Lee said shyly. "Or if a waterbender locks you in ice. That's happened to me."

Amaya whistled. "I've never heard of firebenders doing that." Much the opposite. Icing over a firebender was *lethal*. Or so she'd been taught.

"Uncle invented it," Lee said proudly. "He-" The teenager blanched.

Amaya frowned, then realized the likely cause. "That would give away who you are, to another firebender?"

"...Maybe." Lee looked stricken.

"Lee." She tried not to chuckle. Really. "There can't be that many great names out there who've been declared - what was the term your uncle used, traitors to the Dragon Throne? If I wanted to learn who you were, I probably could." Amaya gave him a serious look. "But I won't. That is your secret, and I will not take it from you." *You've lost so much already*. "You are my apprentice. You're safe with me. I promise."

Lee just looked at her, wary green eyes enough to break her heart.

He wants to believe me. But he should have been safe with his sister, too.

"Though I admit, it is interesting to know ingenuity runs in the family," Amaya said lightly. She spread out the scroll again. "Which of these should we try?"

"I appreciate the company, nephew," Iroh said warmly, folding his apron before bowing to his employer. Pao might be cranky and a bit cheap, but he'd defended a mere employee from Dai Li interest, and that was no small thing. "But a young man might like some time to himself in the evening, with so many lovely girls in the neighborhood-"

"Jet's around. Somewhere," Zuko said grimly.

"That insane boy?" the teashop owner bleated. "Again?"

"I lost him in the Middle Ring." Zuko shrugged. "Tried to talk him down, but I don't think he's listening."

"He'll listen to the clink of handcuffs, if I see him!" Pao fumed. "Reckless, destructive... cost good money to replace that table, and the door-!"

"You're very thoughtful. Good night!" Iroh said cheerfully. And ushered Zuko out the door before the man could remember the other half of that destruction.

Yes, it is a very good thing Zuko is not working here.

Though perhaps a shame, in a way. There were quite a few pretty girls his nephew's age who stopped in for afternoon tea.

Ah well. His nephew's nerves were stretched taut as it was. Perhaps this was not the best time to try to prod Zuko toward anything as normal as a date.

Wait a few weeks, Iroh decided. Let him grow accustomed to the city, and its people. Tread gently. At least until we've dealt with this Jet boy, one way or another.

Oh Agni, he could all too easily see how that could become a disaster. A vindictive teenager, a young lady who might know no better than to dodge *into* a blade's path, and his overprotective nephew - well.

No. Better not to shove Zuko into that aspect of normal life. Not yet.

"So how was your day?" Iroh asked as they headed home. Though part of it was written on his nephew's face. Even another duel with Jet should not have left his nephew so worn.

Surprisingly, Zuko gave him a smile. "Master Amaya and I are working on a water wall."

"Truly?" Iroh raised an intrigued brow. "I had thought the Northern waterbenders did not teach women skills beyond healing." Unlike the Southern Water Tribe. Now, those folk knew how to *fight*.

I wish I could have done more to save them.

Yet he'd still been loyal to Azulon then, and fighting generals of the Earth Kingdom. The South Pole raids were not in his theater of operations. Once he'd learned of the White Lotus, and its goals, he had been able to arrange for contacts to spirit a few of the survivors from prison. So long as it was made clear their efforts in the war were *over*.

A few. Painfully few.

You did what you could, and what was wise for your people, Iroh told himself. If Lu Ten had not

died-

No. Better not to torment himself with such thoughts.

"They don't," Zuko was saying, "but she's figured out a few things. And I've seen some of the moves on the scroll in action. So we're working on it. It's not real impressive yet."

"What scroll?" Iroh asked, curious.

"Tell you when we get to the apartment." Zuko glanced warily around at the street crowds. "It's been an... interesting day."

Oh dear.

Some time later, Iroh eyed his nephew over what was supposed to be a cup of soothing tea. Not that he could blame the blend for failing. It obviously had not been created with his nephew's gift for havoc in mind. "An interesting day."

Having just recounted a tale of bears, Dai Li, vengeful teens, and confused young firebenders, Zuko shrugged.

"Stay wary with the Dai Li," Iroh advised. "Your caution is an ally and a shield. They will expect a refugee to be more nervous than one born here, and more prepared to hear the worst of the rumors about their actions. If Shirong is clever enough to approach you with care, he is unlikely to change his tactics swiftly."

"But why do they want a waterbender at all?" Zuko said warily.

"If you felt you could trust a waterbender, one born in the Fire Nation, would you not wish them among your forces?" Iroh gave him a pointed look.

"Oh." Zuko winced. "I should have thought of that. It's just, most people in the Fire Nation..."

By which you mean my brother, Iroh thought sadly. *Reconsidered. And the Fire Sages, and those generals not retired, dead, or fled, and the nobles... well, most is fair enough.* "Experience, tactics, and logistics are crucial to winning battles," Iroh stated. "But when those factors are equal, it is the general who can make use of the unexpected who may win the day."

"Don't tell me Sokka's going to be a great general someday," Zuko grumbled.

Now there was a terrifying thought. "Not unless he learns to master his own resources, as well as the Avatar's," Iroh said dryly. "At the moment, most of his offensive capability could be neutralized by... oh, a pretty girl like Ty Lee walking up to the young airbender with an innocent smile."

"You really think he's naïve enough to fall for that?" Zuko said skeptically.

Uncle and nephew stared at each other, then nodded in unison.

"Why didn't I think of that?" Zuko lamented, hands spread to the skies.

"Perhaps because those trained in chi-blocking are not permitted to travel outside the Fire Nation?" Iroh suggested mildly. "We do not wish to risk other nations gaining the technique. Out of compassion for its users, if nothing else. I know what unscrupulous generals of the Earth Kingdom - Fong comes to mind - would be willing to do to gain such knowledge." Physical torture of chi-

blockers would be the least of it. "And there is the difficulty of getting such an agent close enough to an airbender to begin with."

"Yeah, but if you could, he'd be toast," Zuko muttered. "Even if they missed enough that he could still move... without bending, he's just a skinny kid with a staff. He has no combat training. None of them do, master benders or not-" Zuko froze. And swore under his breath; something he had to have picked up from their crew. "Azula's got Ty Lee with her."

"You do not know that," Iroh cautioned.

"I know Azula." Zuko's eyes narrowed, grim. "*She'd* get away with it. They ran from her, Uncle. Why else would they let her chase them into making stupid mistakes? A tank's *not* a small target. They could have frozen it. Or swallowed it in rock. They didn't. They ran. They were afraid." His voice dropped. "There's only one thing that scares a bender that much."

"Amaya told me," Iroh said heavily. "I am sorry, nephew. I am so, so sorry I did not know...."

Zuko was smiling at him. Ruefully, but a smile. "It's not as bad as you think, Uncle. Ty Lee's loyal to Azula... but Azula always said it was training. So Ty Lee could *help*. Sometimes."

Iroh raised a skeptical brow.

"I learned how to dodge. Some of it, anyway." Still that wry, wistful smile. "If I don't see her coming, she can get my bending. But I can move fast enough that she doesn't put me all the way down. Most of the time."

"And so, the swords," Iroh realized.

Zuko nodded.

"Well done," Iroh said with quiet pride.

Tired as he was, Zuko still sat straighter.

"Though I am curious to know why you chose that path, rather than enlist aid," Iroh said, very carefully.

"Didn't want Azula to try smothering me in my sleep again," Zuko shrugged. "At least with Ty Lee doing it, I was pretty sure I'd still be breathing afterward."

The teacup shattered.

"... You're bleeding." Zuko pulled flame from the lamp, searing out pottery dust to leave whole skin behind.

Would that my heart healed as easily. "You told your parents of this?"

"Mom told her it was wrong," Zuko kept his voice quiet. Level. "So she went to Father, and told him what horrible lies I was telling to get her in trouble. He said that was unworthy of a great name's son. And he smiled at her." He looked aside, into memory. "She smiled just like that, at Grandfather's funeral." Zuko swallowed. "Can we not talk about her? She's not here, and Jet is, and arguing with him doesn't work. What do I do, tie him up and drop him down a well?"

"It is tempting," Iroh acknowledged, setting the anger aside. Time enough for fury later, when Zuko would be sure it was not aimed at *him*. "I can only say, do as you think best at the time." He

smiled wryly. "And I am working in a teashop, nephew. Should he be so rude twice - I am certain, given your example, I can improvise."

Zuko nodded, reluctantly satisfied.

"Perhaps an early night would be wise, for both of us," Iroh reflected. "But I would like you to consider something, Prince Zuko."

"Uncle?" Zuko said warily.

"There is a certain freedom of action in being declared a traitor to the throne," Iroh said levelly. "My brother is not here. The laws of our nation do not rule here. Do what *you* believe is right." He paused. "And never forget that here, she is not a princess, whose every command must be carried out without fail. Nor are you an exile. She is an enemy of Ba Sing Se, and you are a healer, serving our people within these walls. Innocents she would see executed as traitors, simply for seeking sanctuary. If by some stroke of ill luck she chances on us again - *strike her down.*"

"I'll..." Zuko swallowed dryly, and nodded. "I'll think about that, Uncle."

I pray you do, nephew. Watching Zuko disappear behind a closed screen, Iroh sighed. *I never want her to hurt you again. I never want her to believe she has the right.*

Ozai. If fate is kind, I will not meet you again. No matter what you have done, you are still my brother, and I would not force Zuko to choose between us. That wound, at least, I would spare him.

But if fate is not kind....

You have a very great deal to answer for.

"Kitty."

Zuko eyed the stuffed calico toy being thrust at him by grubby hands, and nodded. "Looks like a cat-owl to me. Now, just let me see-"

"My kitty!"

"Yes, it is." Zuko gripped the youngster's arm lightly, turning it to get a better look in the morning light. He wasn't sure if his patient was a boy or girl, and he didn't really want to ask. "Just let me see this scratch your mother says-"

"My kitty!"

He dodged the blow by instinct, soft cloth or not. Eyed the brat's mother. Who smiled at him, beaming at her little monster as the kid kept trying to thwack him. "Now, honey," she chirped, "let's not be *too* much trouble."

Now I know why Amaya was grumbling about shirshu darts. "Ma'am?" Zuko said politely. "Could you take the toy for a minute?" He could deal with a bear. He'd deal with this-

"Mine!" The toddler lunged, and Zuko barely fended off snapping teeth.

No more nice healer for you, brat.

"Well, I *never!*"

In the midst of taking down the exact improbable sequence of events that had led to a fisherman getting a hook somewhere very painful indeed, Amaya looked up as Madam Li stormed out from behind Lee's screen, biting brat in hand-

Biting, *gagged* brat in hand.

Giggling in the woman's face wasn't the most professional thing she'd ever done. But oh, it felt *good*.

Noon sun warmed him down to the bones as Zuko ran cold katas in Amaya's garden, warmth seeping in to replace what healing had drained.

Getting better at this.

Granted, nothing he'd done here was as serious as the wounds he'd healed outside of Ba Sing Se. But it was like any firebending. You had to build your strength gradually.

And you have to breathe.

He took time to do that now, trailing his fingers in the barrel of spring-water they'd set up last night. No need to upset the fish by raising the pond to steam-hot.

And I can't tell her I don't need to. Not yet.

The lie of omission twinged Zuko's conscience, but - he did want to learn how to move hot water by firebending. You never knew with spirits, after all. What if Yue changed her mind, and his waterbending vanished tomorrow?

Would be my luck. Can't count on anything.

Which seemed confused even in his own head. Not being a waterbender would make things easier. Wouldn't it?

Touching cool water, Zuko drew it up in a fluid arc. *It's pretty.*

Fire was, too, when you did it right. Though it'd taken him years to find any joy in fire again, after... after.

It was a tool. A weapon. I had it. I needed it. I trained it. But it didn't feel... warm. Not like Mom's fire did. It was just... barren. Empty. All sharp edges.

Like the stiff, brittle bush Ursa had rescued from the gardeners once; all thorns and no roses, until she'd planted it in a secluded wild nook, and nursed it into green life.

Those first small buds had smelled like magic.

A breath, and flame danced in his other hand. Zuko turned his palms sideways to face each other, flames and water twisting around each other like bright ribbons.

I think Mom would have liked this.

For once, he didn't shy away from the thought. If Ursa had been a healer, she'd probably been good

with outside fire, too. And water was *like* that. Sort of.

A stab of pain. Water twisted too slowly, and everything scrambled together as steam.

Don't lose it! Just try.

A swirl of both hands, and a boiling sphere hovered between them.

Past the greenery, Zuko heard the screen slide back, and hastily dropped steaming water into the barrel.

"Having fun?" Amaya smiled at him, walking over to gaze into the pond. "Break's almost over."

"How did you- oh." *I can feel fire when it's close.* "You can feel water moving that far away?"

"Your range improves with experience," Amaya nodded. "It helps that I live here. I know where all the water is supposed to be. You could probably do the same with fire, when you've stayed here a few more months." Still smiling, she waved her hand through fading wisps of steam, gathering it into water around her fingertips.

And looked suddenly thoughtful.

Not good. Whatever it is. "So did you still want me to stand the watch here tonight?" Zuko got out, trying to sound sheepish. "I'm sorry about the gag, it just seemed like a good idea...."

"Oh, I've threatened her with as much before," Amaya said wryly, letting water slide off her fingers. "Now, perhaps, she'll believe me. Hurt children are upset. That's acceptable. Biting is *not*." She glanced at him. "Besides. I'm curious to find out what your uncle considers a good evening of tea and conversation."

"Music and food," Zuko said ruefully. "Don't let him talk you into playing a tsungi horn."

Amaya snorted. "Not that I even know what a tsungi horn is...."

Oops.

"And on that note - *standing watch* is something you don't usually hear off the docks in this city. Most would say, *hold down the fort*."

"Oh." *Damn.*

"Hmm." But curious as she looked, Amaya didn't press farther. "Good luck with Jinhai."

"Thanks," Zuko said warily. *After yesterday, I'm going to need it.*

"He gagged the boy?" Mushi clapped a hand to his forehead in disbelief.

Toying with the last of her dessert, Amaya couldn't help but snicker. "He's a very direct young man, your Lee."

"He may never believe this, but that does run in the family," her dinner companion smiled back. "A few more years will calm him down. If we can keep him alive that long."

Assuming I'll help, are you? Not that it was far off the mark. She liked the man's nephew; prickly

temper, awkwardness, and all. Even if she hadn't liked him, Lee seemed to be a genuinely good young man. If a little confused about people who weren't out to harm him. She'd feel very small if she didn't help just because he was a firebender. "You always expect trouble, don't you? Both of you. Lee's just more obvious about it."

"Our lives have rarely been quiet," Mushi allowed. "I find working in a teashop very relaxing. And your work? It cannot be easy, taking in an apprentice after years alone. I know my nephew is not always the most patient of students."

"You might be surprised," Amaya mused, setting her chopsticks aside. "He isn't calm, but he is determined. He behaves very well, most of the time. And he's been responsible about getting out of sight if he does need to swear and hit the ground." She regarded Mushi thoughtfully. "How much was his mother able to teach him, before she...." Spirits, what did she say?

"Vanished," Mushi said firmly. "Fled, I hope. Thought I fear- well. I do not know." A quiet shrug. "Nor do I know what she was able to teach him, while his bending was still uncertain. He knew how to soothe pain, at least. And when I showed him what I knew of her kata, he was able to take it that step beyond, and truly heal."

"Tide-touched," Amaya said thoughtfully. "Or... well, I suppose you'd call it something else." How to define it? "Huojin and other swordsmen call recruits like that, a natural?"

"Someone who has the proper instincts, which training will hone," Mushi nodded. "I had not heard of this in bending. I have known prodigies, who take to training very quickly - but that is not the same."

"I'd be surprised if you had known of them," Amaya admitted. "It's not common even in my tribe, where children are often granted freedom to play with water in the moonlight for a year before formal instruction begins. Master Pakku learned that way, I heard. And I imagine hardly anyone in the Earth Kingdom learns from the badger-moles anymore." Amaya glanced around the rest of the dinner crowd enjoying sidewalk tables in the lantern-light. *Clear. Good.* "A bender who learns from the original source always seems to have a more intuitive grasp than those just taught by humans."

Mushi considered that, and nodded thoughtfully. "Then it would seem that even as an adult, this may be true."

Amaya lifted a brow, intrigued. *We were taught by the Moon and Ocean. Who were you taught by?*

"Though I do not know any way my nephew could have-" Mushi cut himself off, looking very thoughtful.

Amaya leaned back in her chair. "You know, when Lee looks like that, it means he was right about something all along, and he'd really hoped he wasn't."

"It is a very long story...." His glance touched the crowd, and green eyes narrowed. "And best saved for another time. Good evening, Smellerbee. Longshot. Where is your friend Jet?"

"Fixing his harness," the feral young girl said sourly, as the silent archer behind her shrugged. "Lee tore it up pretty good with that waterbending trick."

"Ah." Mushi regarded them levelly. "You will, perhaps, understand if I hope that takes him some time."

"Okay, so maybe Jet took it too far going after you," Smellerbee said defensively. "Lee didn't have

to attack him!"

"I'm sure he didn't-" Amaya began.

"I am certain he did," Mushi said dryly. "Strike the first blow, at least. But in this city, where the war is not mentioned, by claiming us as Fire Nation, it is Jet who attacked." He eyed both children sternly. "Do you wish us to vanish, never to be seen alive again, simply because your friend somehow believes we might be of those who have wronged him?"

Longshot frowned.

"Jet doesn't go after people without a good reason," Smellerbee protested.

"He'd better not go after anyone near my clinic, or he'll see what I know of waterbending," Amaya said angrily. "Don't you understand what your friend is doing? Every time he levels this charge, he holds a knife to Lee's throat!"

"It's not-" Smellerbee started.

"It is *exactly* that!" Amaya slapped her hand down on the table. "Ba Sing Se took you in. Gave you sanctuary. How dare you threaten that for others?" She shook her head. "Lee is my apprentice, and Mushi is my friend. You send Jet to me. I am Amaya of the Northern Water Tribe, and we've survived enough raids to know them when we see them!"

Longshot raised an eyebrow. Touched Smellerbee's shoulder, and gave her a serious look.

"You're right," the girl said after a moment. "We should go check on him."

That quickly, they were gone. To her eyes, at least. From Mushi's sober frown, he could see them ghosting through the crowd.

"Perhaps we should make an early night of it," Amaya said quietly. And smiled. "It was a good evening, with good company."

"I am glad." Mushi inclined his head, then rose to escort her back. "I have not had the chance to enjoy such an outing with a lovely lady for some time. You will, perhaps, permit me to hope that if this boy is reined in, you might consider it again sometime?"

"It's possible," Amaya allowed, walking beside him. Pale, perhaps, and devious enough to make her think twice whenever that gleam came into his eye - but he wasn't afraid of her.

He's touched the Spirit World, too.

As had Lee. Prickly and impulsive and wary as a feral pygmy puma, yes. But the boy was comfortable to be around.

She'd missed that. For a very long time.

The walk home was uneventful, thankfully. Reaching her front door, habit made Amaya reach out with waterbending, sensing well and spring and pond-

What in the world?

Oh. Of course. Dropping Mushi a wink, she lowered her voice to a whisper. "Has Lee shown you what he's been up to?"

"We have not had much time," Mushi murmured back, obviously intrigued. "We should enter quietly, then?"

Eyes dancing, Amaya snuck into her own house.

Mushi helped her muffle the screens to the garden, and slipped out onto the path with a silence she'd never expected of him. Step by careful step, they advanced toward the whisper of moving water, and quiet crackle of flames.

It's like the Firelight Fountain, made small.

Frozen into ice, a candle floated on the barrel's surface, flames split into three flickering ribbons by Lee's swift-moving fingers. The young man's face was pale with concentration, as he beckoned a stream of water up to weave snakelike around every strand, inhaled-

And blew a white puff of frost, water crackling into glittering ice.

...*What?*

Beside her, the man who'd faced down guards, bandits, and invading admirals to get here, who'd kept his nephew alive through fire and grief and panic, who'd stood his ground in the face of the unmistakable influence of Tui and La themselves-

Hit the ground in a dead faint.

The world came back in a murmur of voices, and a soft glow of healing blue.

"Uncle? Uncle, don't do this-"

"Nephew." Iroh latched onto Zuko's hand with a sigh of relief, glad for Amaya's support at his side. "I was having the oddest nightmare...."

Eyes open, he looked past the boy, to a candle floating upright, wreathed by ice.

Not a nightmare. Iroh took a steadying breath. Two. "How...?"

"I don't know. I don't know! She drowned me, and you got me back, and the teashop, and something just kept *pushing* and *pulling* at me, so I went to the roof for some air, and-" Zuko waved a hand, and water rippled in echo of it. "I'm sorry, I know you had plans, and now *she's* the heir, and there's nothing I can do...." He winced, and rubbed his temples.

Letting go of Iroh, Amaya crossed over to her apprentice. "Headache?"

"Don't worry about it-"

"You let me decide what I'll worry about." She rested water-wrapped hands on his head, eyes half-closed. "Your uncle told me before that she was considered the heir. Why do both of you look as if someone just died?"

"Several of my plans just did," Iroh admitted. Zuko was young, not foolish. He knew enough to guess the truth. "She was the heir, yes. But we had some hopes...."

"I'm sorry." Zuko looked - small. Exhausted. Beaten. "I know what this means for our people, Uncle. I just... why do they have to hate us so much? So many of our people are going to die, and I

don't care if the spirits think it's balance! It's wrong!"

Oh Agni, Iroh could see it. Azula as the heir, or no one; either path would lead his people into bloodshed, savagery, and civil war. And after a century of violence - to think the Earth Kingdom and Water Tribes would be content to simply sit back and watch, was to be ignorant of the hatred nurtured in human hearts.

Even the Avatar's? "Spirits' gifts are often difficult to understand," Iroh said soberly. "I would not be so swift to assume Yue acted out of hatred."

"I hate to say this of a woman of my tribe, Mushi - but I wouldn't be so quick to say she didn't." Amaya took her hands away, blue eyes narrowed. "Does it always hurt when you waterbend?"

Zuko shook his head. "Just when I try to do them both together. Two different kinds of energy."

"It's not. Or it shouldn't be." She rested a hand on his forehead. "Let me look again."

Long moments passed. Iroh sat still on the path, gathering his scattered wits. Zuko... was a *waterbender*. Spirits, no wonder his nephew was confused.

But he has not lashed out. He has not panicked. He has tried, as much as he can, to face it. To master it.

My beloved nephew. I would claim you as my own in a heartbeat, if you would but allow it.

"Well." Amaya's breath was almost a snarl, as she lifted her hand away. "That is a nasty piece of work, indeed." She glanced between them. "Both of you, brace yourselves. This may be hard to hear."

Iroh held out an arm, comforted when Zuko leaned into it, resting against his side.

"Spirits are energy, that can sometimes take a physical form," Amaya began. "Living beings are energy *in* a physical form. What works for one, sometimes doesn't work for the other. That's why malevolent spirits can often be harmed by salt, when to us it just stings in cuts. Our physical body protects us from what salt does to them." She looked at Zuko. "The fire-blow you took seared you down to your spirit. It left a hole in you. A scarred hole, where some of your own energy should have been. An... empty place, Yue could fill with water." Amaya winced. "But to do that - she ripped out the scar."

Zuko shivered against him. Iroh couldn't blame the boy. "And this means?"

"She may not have intended any harm," Amaya said grimly. "For a spirit, I think this might be like - oh, eating when you're starving, and letting the food build your muscles back up. But humans aren't that simple. Tear our scars, and you can't just slap new flesh into place. Lee is bleeding, whenever he uses both together. It flexes the heart of who he is, and the scar gapes." She shook her head. "No wonder you're always exhausted."

Iroh held his nephew close. "Can you heal this?"

"That depends on what you mean by heal." Amaya regarded Zuko soberly. "Lee... no. If I do this, I'll need to touch you more deeply than ordinary healing reaches. I promised I wouldn't ask. But for this, I need your name."

"Zuko." His nephew swallowed dryly. "My name is Zuko. Son of Ursa, and-" He closed his mouth, and shook his head.

"That's enough," Amaya said kindly. "Zuko. I see three paths we can take. First - we could do nothing. I don't advise that, but it won't kill you. Immediately. You have a strong spirit. It's quite possible you could go on this way for years. But Huojin says you *react* in a fight, and if that's true with your bending as well-" Her grim look told its own story.

"A better option, if you would," Iroh said dryly.

"I could restore the scar." Amaya winced as she said it. "My teacher told me never to take with this gift. Only to give. But to save a life... I think he would understand."

"No more water," Zuko said numbly. "It'd make things - simpler."

"No," Iroh said softly, feeling his nephew tremble. "Oh, no. You have been well. You have been *happy*."

"I have a duty to our people, Uncle." Still numb. Still aching. "What I want doesn't matter."

"It does," Iroh said fiercely. "This time, it does! Think! You said this was Yue's answer to my question. I asked how to save our people, nephew! How to find a path that would hold those bound by love and loyalty together, no matter what nation their forebears came from." He gripped the boy's shoulder. "Think! How can the Avatar shatter us apart, when you stand whole before him?"

"But - if she's the heir-"

Iroh sighed, letting the last of a decade's plans float free as scattered dust. "The damage done has been too great," the retired general said soberly. "There are too many in power like Zhao, and too few like Jeong Jeong. Even if the Avatar himself tried to enforce a peace, firebending has been twisted for far too long. There will be war. In a way, there *must* be war. Corruption festers throughout our nation, and it must be burned clean." Iroh rested a hand on dark hair. "Enough, nephew. We have both suffered enough. Choose your *own* destiny."

Zuko looked at him, and nodded. Turned to Amaya. "You said there was another way?"

"My teacher taught me to touch the flesh along with the spirit," Amaya said plainly. "I think I can fix what Yue intended to do. But are you sure? This will be the most delicate work I've ever done. If you fight me, if you fight at all - I can't imagine the harm I might do. Please. Be *sure*."

Zuko bent his head, fingers clenching and unclenching. "When I knew I was waterbending," he said, almost soundlessly, "when I realized what that meant... I promised myself I'd learn what you did. How to hide our people, and keep them safe. I've fought the spirits my whole life. I'm *not* letting our people die just because I wasn't brave enough to ask you before."

Just for our people? Iroh thought sadly. *Oh, Zuko.*

"And - I want it back." Zuko swallowed dryly. "I've been angry with Uncle for years, angry with the whole world, and it's wrong. I wasn't like that before he-" Fingers strayed near the scar; lowered, and clenched. "He took part of me away, and I want it *back*."

"I can't turn back time," Amaya said gently. "You were wounded. Scarred. I can't change that. This will be water, and it will help you - but it will never be what you were before the fire. It can only be what you are, and what you will be. Is that enough?"

Zuko met her gaze, fiercely determined. "I'll *make* it enough."

Amaya inclined her head, and opened her arms. "Come here. And trust me." She raised her gaze to

Iroh's. "This is going to be delicate. Guard us. Do whatever you have to."

Brows bouncing up in surprise, Iroh nodded. Stood, brushed himself off, and assumed a ready stance.

One hand on Zuko's brow, the other over his heart. Amaya breathed in, and out. And there was light.

Everything was light, and he couldn't seem to close his eyes; it was too bright, he couldn't bear it-

Shh. Trust me, Zuko.

"Amaya?" Why was Amaya *inside* his head? He could feel her worry, her concern. Her determination to make things right, fierce as fire....

Separation is an illusion. We are all a part of each other. A gentle chuckle. *It's just more obvious, spirit to spirit.*

"That's why this is dangerous," Zuko whispered. Or thought he did; nothing felt the way it should, and where had the garden gone? "You're touching my spirit? You shouldn't, you don't want to see-"

We are all capable of great good, and great evil. I have my own darkness. And you are not as lost as you think. A shimmer of light, like an outstretched hand. *Trust me. Help me help you. We can do this, together.*

Tentatively, he reached out....

And *saw* the gash between golden red and moon-blue, seeping away strength as he breathed. So close to right. Just a little off. All he had to do was touch.

Gently. We have time.

Fire and water were opposites, but they weren't *separate*. Fire burned, yielding water disguised in hot smoke. Water held inside it the seeds of fire, just waiting for lightning's strike.

Touch. Hold. Melt. Two into one, in a dance that was so familiar....

Just like that. Fire and Water, and Spirit to bind them both.

Spirit? Those pale, not quite colorless wisps reaching out to red and blue, making them whole?

You are my apprentice. What was taught to me, I now teach you. Use it wisely.

He thought he nodded. Everything felt right. Just tired.

Hang on one moment more... look. Over there.

Another light, apart from them both. Blazing, fierce fire, protecting what it-

Zuko's breath caught. "Uncle... loves me?"

Of course he does, you silly little dragon. You are lovable, once we get past all the prickles. A glittering chuckle. *Get used to it.*

Rest now. You're going to need your strength in the morning. I have a whole new set of lessons for you... waterbender.

Sleep closed over him like a blanket.

"I'm tempted to have you rent out the cot," Amaya said dryly, helping Iroh tuck Zuko back into bed.

"I am tempted to accept," Iroh chuckled, brushing back unruly black hair. "He will be well?"

"I'll have to see how he handles bending both in the morning, but yes, I think so." Blue glanced at him, amused. "You sense spirits. What do you see?"

"Two dragons, no longer wounded," Iroh said softly. A lift of his fingers, and he brushed misty scales; first red, then moon-white. The white was almost the size of its brother, now, and gold eyes regarded him with surprised joy. "Rest now," he wished them both. "I am very, very proud of you."

"Dragons," Amaya breathed, as spirits faded. "You think Zuko learned from dragons."

"No," Iroh said thoughtfully, stepping back from Zuko's cot. "I know he learned from his mother. Who, I believe, may be a dragon's child."

A long silence.

"Walk with me," Amaya requested.

They sat in the opening leading to the garden, Amaya eyeing the thickening moon.

"You seem to believe me," Iroh observed.

"If you were going to lie to me, I think you'd do it with something a little less impossible," the healer said tartly. "Though I admit, I'm trying not to imagine how that works."

Iroh chuckled ruefully. "From our tales, the dragon takes human form. For a night, a year and a day, or a lifetime. They are not ordinary creatures," he added at her look of shock. "They love, and they hate, just as we. And like us, they can be capable of great evil. As Sozin's dragon companion was, hunting down his own kin who would not bow in the wake of the massacre...." He sighed. "I am not *certain*. There are only - little things. About Zuko, and Lady Ursa, and her parents, Shidan and Lady Kotone. Separate, they mean nothing. Together...." He shrugged.

"I see one already," Amaya said thoughtfully. "In a nation obsessed with power, how does a man not noble rate a lady's hand?"

"By being a powerful firebender, who is also most adept with daisho," Iroh said practically. "Her father approved the match the day he appeared."

"Appeared," Amaya echoed quietly.

"Indeed. True, Shidan brought a genealogy to the match. Which tales say most dragons do not," Iroh admitted. "Though given the order to hunt them had already been issued...." He shrugged again. "Questionable, but not proof. Nor are the swords. Though most firebenders of any skill simply do not bother to master other weapons. My nephew is a rare exception." He hesitated. "And the healing fire... it is the colors of dragons' fire. When they breathe to teach, and not to slay."

Amaya leaned against the frame, considering that. "I was going to ask why you took Zuko's waterbending so calmly-"

"You consider a faint calm?" Iroh murmured, embarrassed.

"You didn't scream at him. You didn't even scold him," Amaya pointed out. "I can only imagine what Master Pakku would have done if one of his students had suddenly thrown sparks. It wouldn't have been pretty."

No, likely not. A member of the White Lotus Pakku might be, but open-minded? No.

"But you're used to the impossible," Amaya went on.

"I have seen the Avatar unleash the fury of Ocean himself," Iroh said gravely. "Many things may be unlikely. But I would hesitate to assume anything impossible." He smiled. "Besides. You did not know my nephew when he was young. He loves water almost as much as he loves wind. If any firebender could master water, it would be Zuko."

Amaya eyed him. "If your nephew hadn't made it clear you two have met the Avatar, and if I hadn't felt his spirit with my own bending... well."

"My nephew is not *that* unlucky," Iroh said wryly. "Though I plan to have words with the Moon, should we ever meet again."

"She may have done all she could," Amaya said reluctantly. "I was always told the spirits aren't there to solve our problems. They point the way. After that, it's up to us to step in and choose."

Iroh inclined his head, accepting that point. *Though had we left here without discovering the injury... spirits are not always kind. The Avatar has returned; they must have a plan. So long as Zuko survived long enough to carry out their chosen part for him - I doubt some of them would have cared what became of him afterward.*

"But this question you asked Yue... surely you don't mean for Zuko to fight the Avatar?"

"I do not," Iroh said plainly. *Though he has. And that is the purpose of the White Lotus, if hope should fail and an Avatar become corrupt and cruel.* "But to stand in the way of hasty judgments by a naïve young boy - yes, that Zuko will do. And I will stand with him."

"I don't understand," Amaya said warily.

Iroh nodded. "Do you wish to be forced back to the North Pole, Lady Amaya?"

"*Forced* back?" the healer exclaimed, disbelieving. "Who would-?" She read the answer in his level gaze, and recoiled. "He wouldn't!"

"Do we know?" Iroh said bluntly. "Does anyone? The Avatar's balance is meant to include four *separate* nations. Yet we have lived without that for a hundred years. What will he decide is right, for those like you, who choose another land as home? For families like Jinhai's, who are earth *and* fire? For untold numbers of people in the Fire Nation, whose parents and grandparents might have blood of earth, or water, or even remnants of air?" He spread empty hands. "I do not know. I cannot even begin to guess. And if *I* do not know, Zuko has every right to be afraid for our people."

"That certain of yourself, are you?" Amaya said dryly.

"Yes," Iroh said simply.

While she was still stunned, he marshaled his thoughts. "There is something else you must consider. Sooner or later, Jinhai must leave Ba Sing Se."

"This is his home-"

"He is a *firebender*." Iroh regarded her soberly. "Believe me when I say to you, a child cannot hide that forever, even with help. A month, a year - sooner or later, the Dai Li will come for him."

"But he can't leave," Amaya whispered. "There's nowhere else to go."

"Not yet," Iroh said practically. "My nephew and I plan to create one."

She stared at him, speechless.

"It is not impossible," Iroh said frankly. "Zuko and I know what is required to create, fortify, and defend a colony. And how to evacuate civilians, even under difficult conditions. I should like a few more months to develop it, but we have already begun to craft a plan that should work. If our people decide they wish to leave."

She was still staring.

Iroh lifted a hand to reach out to her, and reluctantly thought better of it. "I know this must seem abrupt-"

"Abrupt?" Amaya finally burst out. "Zuko says he wants to learn how to protect refugees, to hide them - and now you say you've been planning all along to toss that away?"

"A plan we hope we will never have to use," Iroh insisted. "Zuko does wish to learn from you. Even if we evacuate, we may still need to hide what we are. And as for plans - we are great names, Lady Amaya. We protect our people. From the moment we knew what the Dai Li were, we knew we would need strategies to use against them."

"And letting them try to *recruit* Zuko is part of your strategy?" Blue eyes flashed at him, anger rising.

"A wise strategist makes use of the unexpected," Iroh said practically. "My nephew knows the risks. He will be cautious."

"He's sixteen!"

"Seventeen, in a few months," Iroh pointed out. "Amaya. He was banished at thirteen. Saw his first lethal battle a year later. And has fought alongside me throughout our journey, most recently against bandits who very much wished us dead. He is *not* a child."

"But you're asking him for the impossible," Amaya protested.

"No. His father asked the impossible," Iroh said grimly. "I only ask for the difficult. And I will not abandon him, lost and afraid, with no idea where to even start." He leaned back, deliberately lightening his tone. "I think you underestimate your apprentice. You assume that *I* proposed this plan."

About to speak, Amaya cut herself off. Narrowed her eyes at him. Shook her head, and glanced behind them into the shadows of the clinic.

"It is a very hopeful sign," Iroh said quietly. "To even consider this, instead of what I know his

father wishes... that loyalty is weakening. A few months, perhaps a year - he will survive, Amaya. I *know* it."

"You," Amaya said, after long minutes of thoughtful silence, "are absolutely *insane*."

Which was exactly what his then not-yet-fiancée Natsu had said, many decades ago. Obviously, the night was looking up.

Catching the warmth of his smile, Amaya scowled. "That was *not* a compliment."

"No?" Iroh did his best to look surprised. And innocent. And *cuddly*.

"Don't even *think* about it." Still scowling, she stood, and *hmp*ed. "Stay with Zuko, or go home. Your choice."

"Most generous of you." Iroh stood as well, and bowed. "I wish you a very good night." Turning, he executed a polite strategic withdrawal.

And grinned all the way to bed.

He still missed Natsu. He always would. Though not as sharply as he missed Lu Ten. Natsu had been gone near two decades, now; his son's grief was fresher, and sharpened by being, in part, his responsibility.

But raising Zuko had helped soften that pain. Quarrelsome, impatient, often reckless and sometimes foolish - Zuko still loved him, mending the heart Iroh had thought forever broken by Ba Sing Se.

My second son.

He had decided long ago he would not repeat his father's mistakes. He would love this unlooked-for child, and teach him honor, loyalty, and justice. As Zuko had taught him of the wonder that could be hidden under a mask of rage, and resilience in the face of overwhelming odds.

Still. All battles are easier with allies... and friends.

He would like to be Amaya's friend. He would like that very much. She was lovely and inventive and quietly, fiercely brave.

But she was also Zuko's teacher. And he would *not* interfere with his nephew's training.

Be patient. Wait. You have made your interest clear; let her choose what she will and will not risk. There is time.

Clearing his mind of hopes and nightmares, Iroh meditated to his nephew's breathing. And deliberately fell asleep.

Chapter 14

Note to self, Huojin thought, head still ringing from hitting the clinic wall, do not shake sleeping imperial firebenders. Bad idea.

“H’ojin?” Lee muttered, blinking as if he couldn’t figure out why, exactly, he was half-dressed with a groaning Guard at his feet. “S middle of the night... two hours ‘til dawn, easy...”

Blinking away a few stars, Huojin eyed him with disbelief. “You *can’t* be looking at a clock.”

“Who needs a clock? I know-” A jaw-cracking yawn. “Know where the sun is. Isn’t. S’night. Go ‘way.” Eyes sliding shut, he meandered back to the cot.

“Healing emergency.” Face freshly washed, Amaya emerged, giving her apprentice a look of rueful sympathy. “If you’ve rested enough, I could use your help.” She glanced at Huojin. “Are you all right?”

“Had worse,” Huojin admitted. Touched the sore spot, and winced. “Remind me to throw water on him next time.”

That seemed to jerk Lee awake. Green eyes widened, guilty. “I’m *sorry*. Uncle always calls from the door to wake me up, don’t move-”

“I’ll handle it,” Amaya said firmly. “Get dressed. You’re coming.”

Nodding, Lee grabbed his clothes from the foot of the cot, and stumbled off to the washroom.

Sprawled on the next cot over, Mushi simply snored.

Amaya’s cool touch washed away the pain, and Huojin picked himself off the floor. “Thanks. What are they doing here?” He didn’t mean for it to sound like an accusation. Much.

“Aftereffects of Lee’s drowning,” Amaya said blandly. “The spirits really do have it in for that young man.”

“Maybe this isn’t the best call to take him on,” Huojin said reluctantly. “Everything’s *supposed* to be handled...” But you could never be sure. Not with creatures like these.

“What’s handled?”

Kid moves fast. “Let’s just say, this wasn’t a regular house fire,” Huojin told the firebender plainly.

“And there are reasons I treat the Dai Li, if they need me,” Amaya added. “They were meant to protect the cultural heritage of Ba Sing Se. They still do. But protecting history means protecting ancient artifacts, and with that...”

“*Tsukumogami*.” Lee looked a bit more awake, feeling at his sash. “I’ve got salt, but I don’t know anything about consoling ceremonies. That’s more of a Fire Sage thing... what?” he asked at Huojin’s raised brows. “They held ceremonies every solstice where I grew up. Ba Sing Se’s not the only place with old things.”

“Hadn’t occurred to me,” the Guard said honestly. “Is that what you call ninety-nine-year spirits?”

“We have some odd words,” Lee said after a moment. Sighed, and seemed to brace himself. “So

Dai Li handle spirits? They must be pretty strong benders.”

“And how,” Huojin agreed grimly. Eyed Amaya again. “You sure you want to bring him? It’s supposed to be just cleanup, but....”

“Anyone who can dodge the Ocean Spirit in a bad mood is safer than you are,” Amaya replied, dryly amused. “Let’s go.”

I tried. Shivering slightly, Huojin led the way.

“What’s wrong?” Lee asked as they threaded their way through dark streets.

“What’s wrong?” Huojin echoed, incredulous. “Spirits, Lee. Any sane man would be heading the *other way*.”

“That just lets them hit you from behind.”

Which implied Lee was both pessimistic enough to believe running wouldn’t do any good, and optimistic enough to believe he could survive anyway. Ow.

At least the aftermath looked quiet. An unassuming block of Lower Ring apartments, now smoke-stained and surrounded by a huddle of evacuated residents and a few nervous City Guards. You couldn’t see the Dai Li moving through shadows and over rooftops, but you knew they were there.

Amaya headed for the worst of the wounded, those already being tended with herbs and poultices by some of the local non-bending healers. The looks of relief on their faces were enough to make Huojin wince.

Lee hung back a little, taking a few moments to glance over buildings and knots of people before he murmured in Amaya’s ear and started setting up his firepot.

Marked the trouble spots, Huojin realized, following the firebender’s gaze to suspiciously thick patches of char, and faces more angry than glad to be alive. *Ready to pull out and take Amaya with you, aren’t you?*

Not the most professional reaction from a healer. But personally? He couldn’t blame Lee one bit.

Let’s see if I can’t head some of that trouble off.

Some of the would-be troublemakers just needed someone to talk to. Or talk *at*. He wasn’t the only Guard listening and nodding politely as various people recounted their fiery encounter with an old stone lamp and a couple of theater fans gone really, really bad.

“-Flapping like a bat-raven!” the latest shocked oldster was recounting, hands up and clawing the air. “Black tears for eyes, that glowed like evil lava....”

Huh. Didn’t sound like a fan-spirit. “I’m sure they’ve gotten all the spirits left in the apartments-”

“No, no, no! Not in there!” A gnarled finger jabbed two alleys over. “I saw it! Before all this happened! But no, no one listens to old Hu....”

Right. And what were the odds of *four* ninety-nine-year spirits loose in the same area? “I’ll check it out,” Huojin sighed. Traded a few words with the officer in charge, and headed down the alley. Panic tended to spread; nip this in the bud, and there’d be less chance of a riot later-

Something hooked around his throat and yanked him into the wall, hard.

What the-?

Silky membranes whipped dust into his eyes, battered his fingers away from gripping the vice on his throat. The alley went red and black, he couldn't breathe-

Something snapped like the crack of a whip, and there was air.

Black and flapping, all right. But caught like a netted cat-owl in a translucent sphere, water leading back to....

That's not Amaya.

Lee was a firebender. Huojin knew that. He'd *seen* it.

Just as plainly as he saw water wrapped around the teen's hands, anchoring the net holding a squealing, homicidal spirit. A black, tattered....

Huojin closed his eyes, and shook his head to rattle the image free. Peeked.

No good. Still there.

I almost got strangled to death by an umbrella.

I'm never going to live this down.

"Get help," Lee said tightly.

"No need," came a familiar voice. "We're here."

Iron chains shot out, trapping the indignant spirit with an almost cheery rattle. A familiar Dai Li dropped to the ground, hands clasped behind him as he regarded the thrashing umbrella. "You can let go now."

"Agent Shirong." Water swept back into Lee's waterskin in a flow that stuttered, like a spring freshet around a just-dropped log. "I didn't know the Dai Li handled... things like this."

"Most people would rather not think about it," Shirong shrugged. Eyed Lee. "I don't remember that move from the scroll."

"...I kind of made it up."

Must've hit my head on the wall harder than I thought, Huojin concluded. It was the only way any of this made sense.

"Hmm." Even shadowed by his hat, a flicker of Shirong's surprise still showed. "Then you might want to see if you can modify it. As it is, you're using both hands...."

"So once I've got it, what do I do with it?" Lee sighed. "I know. I can switch off to just one, but it takes a lot of concentration. I'll ask Master Amaya... what?"

Shirong was studying him, very carefully, as fellow agents vanished with the umbrella. "You're far too calm. What kind of kamuiy have you fought before?"

Oh, this is bad, Huojin realized. *No way can he tell them - and damn it, Lee's an awful liar-*

"A plague spirit," Lee said quietly.

“Seriously?” Huojin croaked.

“One of the scariest nights of my life.” Lee started to go on, stopped, and drew a deep breath, obviously gathering his thoughts. “While Uncle and I were traveling, we came to a ranch, where the animals were sick, and.... We’re not sure of all of it. This is just what we figured out after - after we found the body.”

Shirong winced; the most human reaction Huojin had ever seen on a Dai Li. “A mother with child.”

“She was just a girl,” Lee said sadly. “She wasn’t even my age. We found out there’d been a Fire Nation raid there, months ago, and-” He spread empty hands, helpless. “Her father said she was *missing*. Her brothers were going along with it.”

“That’d do it.” Shirong actually looked ill. “How did you stop it?”

“Burned the ranch down,” Lee shrugged.

Huojin clapped a hand to his forehead in disbelief.

“At least we hope it worked,” Lee said sheepishly. “We couldn’t exactly stick around. How do you prove you’re *not* a firebender?”

...*He did not just say that.*

“Good point,” Shirong chuckled. Turned to go, and paused. “By the way. Plague spirits are vindictive little bastards. If it didn’t follow you, then it worked.”

Some of the tension went out of Lee’s shoulders. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“Try to stay out of trouble,” Shirong advised, almost kindly. “I know you won’t be able to entirely, the spirits have painted a target on your back just like the rest of us... but try not to get into any *human* trouble.” A vicious chuckle. “It’s so messy when we have to scrape people off walls.”

A rumble of earth, and he dropped out of sight.

“Showoff,” Huojin grumbled. And eyed Lee uncertainly. “What... *how*?”

“I drowned.” Lee was eyeing him right back, wary as if trying to gauge which way to run. “The Moon - did something to me. It’s crazy, but it’s real.” He swallowed. “Amaya’s going to help me train that, too.”

Too? As in- “You’re... both?” Huojin got out.

“I thought Uncle would be mad,” Lee said in a very small voice.

“No, really?” Huojin managed. Firebender with a waterbending nephew. *Ouch*.

“But he’s not,” Lee went on, surprised.

“The clinic still standing was a clue,” Huojin said dryly, rubbing his throat. *Ow*.

“Uncle doesn’t - um. Well, he hasn’t... for a while... he’s *retired*....”

“I don’t want to know what from, do I?”

“No,” Lee said honestly. Glanced aside, as they started walking back toward the survivors. “He should be really retired. Playing Pai Sho, like he wants... but when he got home, Father - dumped me on him. I didn’t - didn’t really take it well.”

That sounded like an understatement. *So why are you telling me this?* Huojin wondered.

“Did you do that to Amaya?” Lee asked, low and quiet. “Just - get mad at her, because she wasn’t who you wanted there?”

Oh. Sounded like drowning had made someone think a little. “I did,” Huojin admitted. “You can tell a kid ‘til you’re blue in the face he can’t have what he wants. Doesn’t make it hurt any less.” He arched a paternal brow. “You could start by apologizing.”

“I thought I’d start with your throat,” Lee said wryly.

Huojin brushed the edge of bruises, and winced. “I can live with that.”

Uncle,

I’m sorry for being angry with you. Because you were there, and Mom wasn’t. Because Father made it clear I wasn’t worth his time, and she was. Because of a lot of things.

I’m going to try to do better.

You’re probably going to have to thump it into my head a few more times, though. Family temper. Reckless. That whole mess.

Going out with Amaya to visit some villages near the Outer Wall. Will be back.

...And don’t tell Huojin, but it’s really hard to save somebody when you’re trying not to giggle. Rabid umbrella-spirit. Heh.

-Lee.

Rereading the note in a lull between customers, Iroh smiled. Folded it away, and turned back to his tea.

Shifting his weight in the apple tree as it swayed in the wind, Zuko looked over the green patchwork of fields and villages inside the Outer Wall. “You could lose small islands out here.”

“Can you see my Fluffykins?” called up from below.

Zuko eyed the fluffy white creature cleaning itself in a cleft of thinner branches, just out of safe arm’s reach. “I see her.”

“Well?”

“If I get her, she’s not going to be happy,” Zuko warned.

“Just get her down, please!”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Zuko muttered. Gathered water, and threw.

The squalling wet white tornado hit a compost pile, and shredded leaves flew.

Even as a waterbender, he's a born firebender, Amaya thought, wryly amused as she helped clean the last of the scratches on those who'd volunteered to catch the city woman's pet. *Never work around a problem when you can cut right through it.*

Ah well. No one had gotten worse than scratches, and Fluffykins was back with her owner, who'd already left to catch the train, after cooing over her still-damp kitty and gratefully dispensing a small sum of coins to everyone who'd helped.

"So what's a city cat doing all the way out here?" Zuko asked, frowning as he checked over one of the wide-eyed farm children.

Good question, Amaya realized. And glanced covertly at her apprentice. *You always know when something's out of place, don't you? Good habit.*

"Some crazy young earthbender from the Upper Ring," the headman's wife, Wu, said with a disapproving scowl. She waved a hand, indicating vaguely north and west. "Carved up some of the fields outside the Inner Wall for a zoo, of all things. They say there was a stampede of animals a few days ago - everything in the city!"

Which unleashed a flood of gossip and speculation; what were the Inner Ring nobles thinking, who was going to feed the city if this caught on, how much had the farmers been compensated more than they *admitted* they had, did this mean the generals were going to move the Outer Wall outward again, and did *that* mean the war was going well, or...?

Zuko, Amaya was startled to notice, paid careful attention to all of it.

And why are you surprised? the healer asked herself after a little thought. *No few of these people are Fire Nation; he can see that as well as they can see him. If he and Mushi are planning... that impossible thing they're planning... of course he needs to know what they're worried about.*

An attention to detail she'd never have expected of someone Zuko's age. Tested by the spirits or not.

They're really planning to do it. Evacuate their people. Create a sanctuary, outside of Ba Sing Se.

I've looked after my hidden folk so long....

But being a healer meant you did what was best for your patients. Not what you wanted. Amaya braced herself, and got through the morning of seeing to those who didn't have the time or strength to come into the Lower Ring. And waited until they were on the train back to murmur, "Do you think you'll be able to send word back to the city, once you're all safe?"

Zuko raised that lone brow and gave her a smirk that reminded her of his uncle. "You want to just hear about it? Or do you want to help *make* it?"

"I *don't* want to!"

Sitting off to the side in the cellar, Tingzhe held his breath, glad he'd sent Suyin upstairs at the first signs of Jinhai heading toward a full-blown temper tantrum. He could see "Lee" silently counting to ten... and the royal line of Sozin wasn't exactly known for calm and even tempers.

"Firebending," the young prince said levelly, sitting still, "comes from the breath, not the muscles. It took my teacher years to get that into my head, but I have a lot of bad habits. You need to start

out with good ones. Fire isn't like other elements. Earth doesn't rise up and crush you; water doesn't decide to pull you down. But fire *will* spread, and it *will* try to consume everything it can. You need to control your fire. And you have to start with breathing."

"I *won't*! It's *stupid* and you're *no fun* and-"

The teenager breathed out sharply, and fire erupted.

Tingzhe forced himself to sit there, even as Jinhai yelped at the flames encircling both firebenders. *He won't hurt a child. Forget his father - the boy you've seen has been patient, kind, and not someone who enjoys the sight of others in pain.*

Spirits, please let me be right....

"You can part another bender's fire with a defensive move. *If* you control your own fire." Zuko's voice was iron. "You want to leave this circle? *Do it.*"

Jinhai's mouth dropped open. "But - that's not *fair*!"

"Who ever told you bending was fair?" Zuko's voice didn't soften. "This is *fire*, Jinhai! Any time you bend, you're walking into a cage with a dillo-lion. A hungry, *angry* dillo-lion. If you don't have control, it will chew you up and spit you out!"

"Daddy...."

Clenched fists hidden in his sleeves, the professor shook his head. "When I was in training, my teacher threw an *extremely* large boulder at my head, son." *I grant you, I was a bit older.* "Lee is correct. Bending is *not* fair."

Jinhai reached out to the flames, and yanked his hand back. "But he's got the fire!"

"Of course I do," Zuko said dryly. "You want the whole house to burn down? If I let go, that's *exactly* what will happen." Green eyes narrowed. "Fire is power, Jinhai. It's the determination to get what you *want*. How badly do you want to get past these flames?"

Don't move, Tingzhe told himself grimly. *Unless he's in actual danger - don't move.*

Another deliberate breath, and Zuko's circle of flames shrunk inward. "How badly do you want it?"

Jinhai was backing away from the flames, wide-eyed, glancing at his father as if he couldn't believe this was happening. "You're being mean!"

"You haven't seen *mean* yet." Zuko's voice held an edge of threat that put the hairs up on the back of Tingzhe's neck. "Jinhai. *I'm tired* is a reason to stop. *I don't know what I'm doing* is a reason to stop. *I don't want to* is *never* a reason to stop." The circle of flames flickered a little lower. "Determination. What do you *want*?"

Fingers almost brushing flames, Jinhai pulled back, almost tripping over Zuko's knee. Looked at his father again, still stunned that Tingzhe wasn't doing anything.

Oh, how I want to. But Tingzhe arched a brow instead, the same as he would when Jinhai brought him any problem the boy needed to solve *himself*. And mouthed, "*Think.*"

Jinhai blinked, and swallowed. "I want... to stop?"

The fire went out.

“That works,” Zuko said tiredly. “That’s enough for today.”

Jinhai was already halfway across the cellar, skidding to a stop in front of his father with wide, hurt eyes-

Turned on his heel, and bolted up the steps.

Tingzhe sighed, heart sore. Eyed the teenager standing there, face closed and defiant, stance balanced and subtly braced.

He expects me to attack him.

Well. And what else would he think?

“Come up to the garden,” Tingzhe requested. “I think you need the sun more than Jinhai does.”

Surprised and wary, Zuko followed him out.

“As one teacher to another,” Tingzhe said levelly as they settled on a bench, “if you’re tired enough to start losing your temper, tell your students to go home.”

Zuko winced.

No stranger to proud young men, Tingzhe waited, letting the silence stretch out.

“...It wasn’t supposed to be like this.” Zuko glared into the tangle of a mustard bush. “I promised Uncle I’d try to think. I’m... things are better right now than they’ve been since - we were on a raft for three weeks with *nothing*! I shouldn’t *be* angry!”

“Perhaps,” Tingzhe mused. *On a raft? Exiled or not, how does a young prince end up... save it for Meixiang. If she’s right, we’ll hear quite a story.* “But if I’d been stuck on a raft three weeks, I think I might still be angry. Let alone if I’d suffered the other events you mentioned.”

The unscarred eye narrowed. “When an Agni Kai’s over, it’s *over*.”

“So I’ve been told,” Tingzhe acknowledged. *And here you risk your life on the hope that you are right, and he’s more like his uncle than his father. You’re a sentimental old man, no doubt.* “But the outcome of the duel does not change the fact that you were betrayed before it ever began.”

Smoke rose from between clenched fingers. “I owed him *loyalty*,” the teen gritted out.

“And as one of the Earth Kingdom, I don’t pretend to understand how strong that bond is,” Tingzhe said bluntly. “But my wife tells me loyalty *never* demands suicide. Forcing a thirteen-year-old boy to duel an unexpected, far stronger opponent - I’m not certain suicide is a strong enough term.” *Attempted murder comes closer. That man, I could believe it of.*

“But as I said, I can’t ever know,” Tingzhe stated, a bit wistfully. “My wife granted me not only her hand, but part of her spirit’s strength. Sometimes, I wonder if my love can ever be a fair return.” He smiled sadly, and leaned back. “Meixiang would like to invite your family to a potluck, next week.”

Zuko hesitated, smoke wisping away. “What’s that?”

Oh dear. “Why don’t we both talk to her,” Tingzhe said plainly. “She can suggest a few things that

aren't hard to cook, and anyway I can never keep straight how much you need to bring for this many people myself." *If he even knows how to cook*, the professor realized ruefully. *Some of our noble children can be spectacularly useless....*

"How many people?" Zuko asked warily.

...Well, let's hope for the best.

"Six children, and six adults," Iroh mused, scratching notes on tattered paper with a bit of charcoal. "Hmm."

Keep it slow. Get the wrist movements right.... Zuko pulled most of the water from the pitcher with only one rippling splash, and started snaking it between his hands. "It's a bad idea."

"It's dinner, nephew. Not a surprise attack."

"Surprised me," Zuko muttered. "They can't really want me there, Uncle. I scared Jinhai."

Iroh only raised a brow. "And what did he do, to deserve being frightened?"

Zuko winced, and had to swirl a hand to keep the stream from falling. "He was being a brat." It sounded so petty.

"During training?" Iroh nodded once. "Then it was wise to correct him." The retired general held up a warning hand before Zuko could protest. "If you feel now that you were too harsh, watch him closely in the next lesson. You do not wish him to be afraid of *you*. But a little fear, in and of itself, is not always bad. Fire is dangerous. Self-control is essential. A firebender *cannot* act like a temperamental brat." Iroh paused, looking into memory. "No matter how much a young one might deserve to."

"I break things," Zuko muttered, feeling even more guilty. "He just - didn't want to breathe."

"You have not broken anything recently," Iroh stated. "Your temper will always need work to control; it is a flaw of our family, and none of us escape it. But unpleasant as that is, nephew - you break *things*. You do not harm people. A firebender who does not control his breath will never control his fire. We both know what that leads to." He set his notes aside, and nodded at the liquid flowing with Zuko's movements. "What is that?"

"Amaya calls it streaming the water," Zuko answered, concentrating as he arced it high. For some reason, moving it over his head always threatened to make it fall apart-

Oh. Idiot. North Pole. Ice and water over your head was not good, remember?

He'd melted it then, and survived. This was just a little water. It was *not* going to drown him.

Rippling water steadied, and he breathed easier, looping the ribbon back down near waist level. "It's a beginner's move. Like playing with a candle."

"To learn the feel of your element, under controlled conditions," Iroh nodded. And paused. "You do *not* have Jinhai working with candles yet."

"No." Zuko flexed the water. Let it gather into a globe in his palm, and tossed it back into a soaring ribbon. "If he works on breathing again tomorrow, I was going to have him try the burning leaf."

"Good," Iroh stated. "If he sees control directly applied, he may more clearly understand why he

needs it.” He raised a brow. “For a beginner’s move, that looks quite useful.”

“Lets you work on quantity, direction, and precision,” Zuko agreed. *Up and around. Can I-? Yeah, just twist that way....* Dragging fingers through the ribbon split one strand into three; he held them rippling for a few moments, then collapsed them back together.

But it’d been a long day, and he could feel the tremors that meant he was pushing too far. Gathering water together, he tipped it back into the pitcher. “I can think of a lot you can do with just this. I’ve already done a few things; that net I used to catch the spirit? I didn’t know what I was doing, when I made it up, but it’s just this in a couple different pieces. Toss water, make a globe, bring it back.” Which meant he might be able to make it work one-handed after all. With practice.

“Basics,” Iroh smiled. “Learn them well, and all else will follow.” He raised a curious brow. “What is it like?”

Zuko frowned, reaching out to the quiet tide-pulls of water in their apartment, in the next over, on the roof. “Like walking in the surf just offshore. It pushes and pulls at you, and most of the time, that’s fine; you just keep going. But if you don’t pay attention, and a rogue wave comes through-” He clapped his hands together, remembering the groan of their ship’s twisted metal in the midst of the typhoon.

“Fire, and the ocean,” Iroh mused. “It is not safe to turn your back on either of them. But respect them, and they are powerful allies.” He laughed softly. “Even beautiful, from how I have seen you bend.”

Oh. That was... interesting to know. He hadn’t really been trying for pretty, it’d just happened that way, and... right. Think. “It feels weird,” Zuko admitted. “Not in chi, Amaya fixed that. Just - being able to do both of them. Fire and water. It shouldn’t work.” He hesitated. “It shouldn’t feel like it fits.”

“They are not as separate as one might think,” Iroh said thoughtfully. “I have been told that at its core, all bending is one; that even non-benders who learn to move their chi for battle, as you are teaching Suyin, draw from the same source. More specifically... have I told you of jin?”

“All eighty-five kinds?” Zuko said warily. He did pay attention to lectures on battle strategies, even if he couldn’t name them all off the top of his head.

“It is wise to know them all, but three are most important to bending,” Iroh observed. “Neutral jin is the key to earthbending. The master waits, and listens, to find the exact moment to strike.”

“Professor Tingzhe,” Zuko realized. “He’s always just... calm. Waiting. Until he knows exactly what he wants to say.”

“Indeed,” Iroh agreed. “I very much hope to have an opportunity to speak of bending with him. We use many similar stances, but the reasons behind them are very different. Which leads us to fire. Positive jin, advancing and attacking, is the heart of our art. As our fire is fueled by our own chi, we often cannot fight as long as other benders. So we attack first, relentlessly, to overwhelm our foes before endurance can tip the battle’s scales.”

That one, Zuko knew. But he nodded and listened anyway, sure Uncle had a point. Well, mostly sure.

“Water may oppose fire, but in tactics and energy, our true opposite is airbending,” Iroh went on. “Negative jin, retreating and evading, are part of the philosophy of air. You have seen this chasing

the Avatar. He will not stand his ground, he will not fight if he can flee; and while he is *himself*, and not possessed by Avatars past, he will not kill.”

“The monks fought,” Zuko pointed out. “I’ve seen the temples.”

“An adult knows when to set aside ideals for reality,” Iroh said practically. “If all life is sacred, so is your own life. And you should not allow it to be taken.” He smiled. “So we have come around the cycle, to water. Which balances both positive and negative jin, turning defense into attack as they use their opponents’ force against them. This conserves energy, and allows them to fight for great lengths of time. But they rarely strike the first blow, and if they are too slow to turn their enemy’s attack, they lose momentum.”

Which could be the difference between a battle won, or lost. Zuko glanced away, thinking that through. “So I know positive, and I’ve fought negative....”

“And you have lived in the tide’s grasp for three years,” Iroh stated. “You know water, Prince Zuko. Perhaps not as one of the Water Tribes would, but you do know it. Build on that.”

I’m going to try. “We haven’t talked about....” Zuko swallowed. “I’m not the heir. You said that wrecked a lot of your plans. Did it - what does being a waterbender do to our plan? Just because our people accept Amaya, doesn’t mean they’ll understand if *I* am.”

“It is likely some will not,” Iroh said bluntly. “Yet it is also likely those are the ones we would not have been able to persuade, even if our names were clear.”

You can’t save them all, Zuko told himself grimly.

...I know I can’t. But I wanted to try. “A lot of them aren’t going to want to leave,” Zuko admitted. “They already started over once.”

“And as you yourself know, to begin another life is never easy,” Iroh nodded. “We will be asking them to leave behind the lives they have built, and cast their fate with those who have created what seems a desperate plan. And if Jinhai is the only firebender who has been born here, in all these years - they may not consider it a risk for their children.” He glanced aside with a grim smile. “Though the risk may be greater than they realize, as the Fire Nation turns more attention here. I think it is not a coincidence that Jinhai was born while my siege still held.”

Okay, interesting to think about later, but not exactly crucial right now. “So we’re only going to get people who are scared, or fed up with the Dai Li, or just out to take a risk,” Zuko concluded.

“Most likely,” Iroh nodded. “And such people are unlikely to balk simply because you are a waterbender. I admit it might have been easier to call on our people’s loyalty had we not been declared traitors, but that time is past. We have both seen what waterbenders can do. You will be a great help.” He sighed. “And given we are alone, and in hiding, it is a great relief to know that one of us will not be without bending during the eclipse.”

Zuko winced. He’d been without his bending before, but Ty Lee had never intended to kill him. Eight minutes without it, without armed backup, when anyone with the brains to look out a window could know firebenders were helpless... not a good situation.

I can’t tell Jinhai. Not until it happens. Maybe the Earth Kingdom has better astronomers than I know, good enough to keep track of the heavens the way the Fire Sages do. But I doubt it. There’s an eclipse every four years, somewhere. If they’d known, they would have used it sometime this last century. So they don’t. And if they don’t - I’m not going to make Professor Tingzhe choose between

his nation and his family.

“As for specifics on how waterbending will help,” Iroh smiled, “I have some ideas.”

“Trade you for some on the fortifications,” Zuko offered.

“Oh?” Iroh looked interested.

“We’re going to have to be ready for any element,” Zuko pointed out. “I have some plans for what we can do if we’ve got metal, or if we have to stick with just wood.”

Sleep would be a while coming, but Uncle’s look of approval was worth it.

“Okay,” Suyin said dubiously, holding the dried oak leaf by its stem. Gripping his own, Jinhai looked equally confused. Watching from the corner as she mended a sleeve, Meixiang *didn’t* look confused - but she didn’t look about to explain, either. “I’m not exactly sure how a leaf is supposed to teach me to fight....”

“Uncle would say something about tiny acorns and mighty oaks, but I’ll spare you the proverbs,” Lee said wryly. “This is actually two lessons. But they’re related. Suyin, you’re getting the moves down, which means it’s time to show you what happens when you have to fight distracted. Which is going to be most of the time. Until you’ve had a *lot* more practice, any time you fight, thinking is going to go right out the window. So I’m going to show you what that’s like now. That way, if you do get in a fight, you’re less likely to panic. If you stay in control, even if you can’t *think*, you’re going to react correctly. Which means you live.”

Swallowing hard, Suyin nodded.

“Jinhai. Your lesson is also about control,” Lee went on. “Control your breathing, and you control your fire. This is going to show you exactly how that works.” He gripped the center of Jinhai’s leaf between two fingers, and a spark blazed. “Focus on the fire. Keep the flame burning as long as you can. *Slowly*. So it takes as long as you can make it to reach the edges of the leaf.” Lee smirked a little. “It’s okay if you mess up. I brought plenty of leaves.”

As one, the two siblings looked over at Lee’s kit. And the paper sack of leaves. Suyin stifled a giggle; not fast enough, though, and Jinhai wrinkled his nose at her.

“Don’t worry. She’s not getting off that easy.” A jab of Lee’s fingers, a wash of heat-

Suyin didn’t drop the leaf. But she felt sweat prickle all over, her breathing quicker, heart speeding up. *Fire, it’s on fire, I’m not a bender....*

“Suyin.” Lee’s voice was eerily calm. “I know you’re scared. That’s the point. Combat is the scariest thing there is. Fire can’t even come close. I *have* the fire, Suyin. I won’t let it burn you. Breathe.”

In through the nose. Out through the mouth. Take your stance.

It was like forcing her thoughts through stone. Everything was too bright, too loud, too fast. Dimly she saw a flare as Jinhai gasped, saw Lee walk across the cellar to give her brother another leaf and some encouraging words. She couldn’t hear what. She wasn’t sure she would have understood if she had.

“Suyin.” Lee was in front of her, gently turning her to face away from her brother. “He burned you

a couple times?”

I'm not going to cry. I'm not. Eyes brimming, she nodded.

“You love him, but you’re afraid.” Lee held her gaze, understanding. “That’s okay. That’s what this is for. Partly. You have to respect fire. But if you’re afraid, you’ll make the wrong decision when it matters. So we’re going to get you past that. Still breathing?”

Mute, Suyin nodded again. *In and out. In, and out.*

“This is hard,” Lee said seriously. “I know that. But I also know you can do it.” He guided her over to the futon. “So we start over. This is how you fall, when you can’t use one of your hands.”

Footsteps stomped deliberately down the stairs, and Zuko bit back a curse. *We must have gone longer than I thought.*

“Min. Jia.” Meixiang’s voice was warm, but not entirely welcoming. “You’re early.”

“Why does he have his hands on Suyin?” Min bit out.

Jia smirked behind him. “And why didn’t you mention he wasn’t bad looking, in a scruffy kind of-”

Letting Suyin up from the pinning hold, Zuko gave Jia a hard look.

“...Ugh.”

Yeah. That’s what I thought.

“You two-!” Suyin blazed.

“Suyin.” Meixiang’s tone was hard. “Forgive my children’s ill manners, Lee. They should know by now what full-contact training looks like. And that not all of us escaped the war unmarked.” She shook her head. “We are going to *talk*, later. I am very disappointed in both of you.”

What am I supposed to say? Zuko wondered. “I forgive you”? I’m a lousy liar. And I’m not the one Min really insulted. Doesn’t he respect his sister’s ability to protect her own honor?

Then again, the Earth Kingdom didn’t teach women to fight. How messed up was that?

Deliberately turning his back on the stairs, Zuko reached out for Jinhai’s slow-burning leaf. “I think that’s enough for today.”

“Aww.” But Jinhai handed the leaf over, gaze still sliding toward his older brother.

“If you want to practice this, get your parents’ permission first, so someone can spot you,” Zuko said plainly. “And do it right over a sand bucket. So if something goes wrong, all you have to do is drop it.” He hoped he hadn’t let the stab of hurt show. He was used to reactions like Jia’s, but Min-

He’s Jinhai’s brother. You’re just his teacher. Let it go.

But that didn’t feel like the right thing to do either. He didn’t intend to interfere with family loyalties, Meixiang should know that even if Min didn’t-

Earthbender. This isn’t about loyalty. I don’t know what it is... but I can’t let him think he can cut

in on their lessons.

Right. Stick to the plan. “There was one more thing I wanted to show you,” Zuko stated. “If Madam Wen doesn’t mind a little experiment? Something the professor said gave me an idea.”

Meixiang raised curious brows. “Let’s see it, then.”

Burning leaf still in hand, Zuko reached into the bag for another handful. Walked to the center of the cleared floor, lit all his leaves from the first, and tossed them into the air.

Move; like water, just a little sharper....

He swept his arms across. Burning leaves followed the arc, swirling in their own hot wind.

Pull, but gently. You don’t want to pull the flame free. You want it to carry its own fuel.

Which wasn’t classic firebending at all. But he’d thrown Sozin’s style against the Avatar a dozen times. It *didn’t* work.

He can snuff out a fire that’s just chi. But if something’s on fire - he’s not so good with that.

And neither is Azula.

Control kept the leaves burning slowly. But he held a loose grip on the fire, not a tight one that would rip it right off the leaves. Careful... gentle... keep everything in motion....

Swirling leaves echoed swirling hands. Zuko turned, and fire twisted around him in a burning whirlwind.

It works!

Flames burned higher as his heart soared; he almost laughed. *No one’s seen firebending like this. Not since-*

Kuzon. He didn’t know how he knew. He was just sure, the way he knew the sun would rise tomorrow.

Kuzon knew healing. He knew airbenders. He must have tried this.

Great-grandfather. Thank you.

Wind slowed as he slowed, bringing his hands up in the opening move of streaming water, gathering fiery bits in a globe between his hands. Zuko felt through the cellar for any other fire, marking his own internal flame, and Jinhai’s, searching for any stray sparks....

And exhaled softly, letting fire die to cool ashes.

“Wow,” Jinhai breathed.

Min, Zuko was grimly amused to note, suddenly didn’t look sure of himself at *all*.

Think, he willed the teenage earthbender. I don’t care how good your teachers tell you you are. I’ve fought earthbenders. If you haven’t fought firebenders - believe me, you don’t want to start with me.

And I don’t want to fight you. I’m here for Jinhai and Suyin. I’m even here for you, you jerk.

You don't want to lose your family. Ever.

Maybe Min would think about it. Maybe Uncle would have a better idea. Right now, he didn't know what else to try. Earth might not have the determination of fire, but they had a stubborn persistence that fixed them to a chosen spot; a fort, a city, a point of view. He wasn't sure how to dislodge Min from his "I hate firebenders" stand without using overwhelming force... and that would *not* have a beneficial effect on Jinhai's training.

So be like water. Evade and redirect. See what happens.

"I'll have to tell my husband about that move," Meixiang mused. "It reminds me of the sandbenders he's described a few times." She nodded, as if to herself. "I'm sure he looks forward to discussing that with your uncle at the potluck."

"You what?" Min started. And cut himself off at his mother's sharp look.

"I know Uncle's looking forward to that," Zuko said politely, deliberately ignoring the tension in the air. He'd eaten dinners with worse enemies. And Iroh was looking forward to this, cooking and all.

The anniversary's coming up. He should - he should have some time to be happy. Before then.

Min wasn't cruel, after all. Just pigheaded and ignorant. He could survive that.

Exchanging bows with his students, Zuko let Meixiang escort him to the door. And tried to ignore a sudden shiver of foreboding.

Pigheaded, ignorant, and knows I'm a firebender. But he won't do anything to expose me. He wouldn't put Jinhai in that kind of danger.

Spirits, I wish I could believe that.

Jumpy as a rabbiroo on hot coals, Huojin thought ruefully, glancing at Lee out of the corner of his eye as the teen attacked his mochi. Much like a canny but harassed Guard commander would, taking apart a hostage situation.

Poor kid. He's trying, he really is. He just doesn't do normal.

Oh, Lee knew which utensils to use, and why; Amaya had given him that much to build on-

"So, what do you do for fun?" Jia gave him a bright smile, only betrayed by the wariness in her eyes.

"I don't."

-He just absolutely failed at small talk.

"Is he always that serious?" Luli whispered in Huojin's ear, eyes dancing.

"Pretty much," Huojin murmured back.

"Aww. Poor kid...."

Down at the children's end of the table, twelve-year-old Lim and nine-year-old Daiyu were happily chatting away with Suyin... and tolerating Jinhai. Which was about as much as you could expect at

their ages, especially after the firebending little scamp had gone after Daiyu's braids with a glue pot a few months back.

Can't really blame Lee for not having a hobby, Huojin admitted to himself. *Between the clinic and keeping the kid out of trouble, who'd have time?*

Not to mention the waterbending. Oma, Shu, and Agni. If Lee was training that on top of everything else - when did he *sleep*?

"Always busy, my nephew," Mushi smiled. "I have tried to interest him in Pai Sho, but he usually prefers studying maps. Or fishing, once in a while."

"Too bad you're not out with the fleets," Min said dryly.

"That would make it hard to study with Master Amaya," Lee said levelly.

"Like you'd really miss that," Min said skeptically.

"Yes. I really would."

Oh no, Huojin almost winced, hearing that level, carefully *calm* tone. *Not good*.

He couldn't blame Amaya for wanting a nice, quiet evening to herself after a week of Lee and Mushi's havoc. But they really could have used a good calm voice of reason right about now.

Still, Luli hadn't been a Guard's wife this long by accident. She stood, with an easy smile. "Well, it's never too late to learn to have a little fun. Right?" She winked at Meixiang.

"The ruby chard's about done in anyway," Meixiang nodded. "Might as well tear up there, if you want." She waved a shooing hand at Lee, smiling wistfully.

The downright *grateful* look the young man cast her didn't belong on any teenager being yanked out the door by a gleeful group of kids, Huojin reflected sourly.

Except it did. Because a great name's son apparently had two main responses to any threat: kill, or ignore. Given he *probably* didn't want to kill Min, and the young earthbender was making it impossible to *ignore* him... yeah.

And from that Look of Doom Tingzhe's got, they've had this discussion before. And it didn't take. Clearing his throat, Huojin shoved his chair over to put a deliberately heavy hand on Min's shoulder. "Piece of advice? Don't do that."

"Why?" Min said sourly. "Because he's a *firebender*?"

"No," Huojin said flatly, not letting his gaze off the teenager as Jia gasped and the rest of the adults tensed. "Because he can break you in half with his bare hands. Literally." *He's trained, he's lethal, and he's having a really bad year.* "What's your problem with him, anyway?"

"He's *Fire Nation*." Min said it like a curse. "You know what they train firebenders for."

"We do," Mushi said, green eyes weighing Min and finding him wanting. "But I can assure you Lee has never been part of a military action against the Earth Kingdom. He has faced earthbenders of the Army, yes; but that was only to rescue me, when I had done something a bit foolish. Even so, he left them alive. Bruised, and buried underneath their own rocks, but otherwise unharmed." He folded his hands before him. "But do *you* know what firebenders are trained for? I suspect you

do not. Or you would not be making yourself an obstacle to a key strategic objective. That objective being,” Mushi went on over Min’s noise of protest, “the safety of Jinhai, your family, and all of us. Jinhai *must* learn, or all of your family is at risk. You are Jinhai’s brother, and he looks up to you. Which means my nephew is considering his options for dealing with you very carefully.”

Jia paled a little. *Proving yet again she’s a lot smarter than she lets on to her friends*, Huojin thought wryly.

“Are you going to let him sit there and say that?” Min said hotly, glancing at his father.

“Min,” Tingzhe said with strained patience, “you are not listening-”

“Oh, I’ve listened enough. Strategic objective? You say a teacher has to *respect* his students. And you’re letting someone teach Jinhai who doesn’t even *care* about him?” Scraping his chair back, Min glared at Mushi. “Everything was *fine* before you showed up! You tell him he can *consider his options* all he wants. I’m going to do what’s *right*.”

“Min-” Meixiang started.

“I’ll be back by curfew!”

In the wake of her brother storming out, Jia smiled weakly. “I’m... going to go brush up my haiku. Need to be in shape for the competition.” Bowing politely, she escaped upstairs.

“Oh, *this* is going to end well,” Huojin said sarcastically. “Professor....”

Tingzhe held up a hand, face sober. “Believe me, we have some idea of exactly how unpleasant this could become.”

“What, worse than you’ve already said?” Luli cocked her head, insatiably curious. “I’m sure it’s not going to be pretty, but they’re just boys. Let them beat each other up a little, and... Meixiang?”

Moving around the table to Mushi’s chair, the professor’s wife was shaking her head sadly. “I don’t think Lee knows how to be *just* a boy. Or am I wrong?” Bending, she whispered something into his ear.

Mushi didn’t turn a hair, but he did sigh. “Perhaps we might continue this with more privacy?”

“My study,” Tingzhe suggested. Frowned at Huojin and Luli. “You may not want to be aware of the details. For your own safety. Meixiang and I already know the most dangerous part....”

“I believe we can speak without mentioning names,” Mushi said genteelly. “If, that is, you truly wish to know more than you do.” Another sigh. “I will say this. If Min truly believes Lee does not respect Jinhai, and says so... he is likely to learn a very *painful* lesson.”

“The Fire Lord,” Huojin said faintly. Luli was gripping his hand, jade eyes wide. “He was up against the *Fire Lord*?”

“It was the Fire Lord’s war room,” Meixiang said bitterly. “If he chose to take offense - yes, he could claim Lee showed disrespect.” Her gaze flashed at Iroh. “It was cruel.”

“It was,” Iroh acknowledged sadly, recalling her silent, respectful whisper: *Prince Iroh*. “I should never have allowed my nephew into that chamber. I should have realized he could not keep silent, when he saw an outrage to our people. I should have known he... trusted too much.”

“He said he didn’t even try to fight.” Tingzhe grimaced at Iroh’s sharp look. “Don’t blame him. He was very careful not to give specifics. But spirits, I can see why.”

“It was the best decision he could have made,” Iroh said grimly. “I recently learned of events around his mother’s disappearance.” He winced. “I knew my brother favored Lee’s sister as heir. I did not imagine the lengths he might go to.”

Luli and Tingzhe paled; Meixiang swallowed dryly. But Huojin....

Huojin *looked* at him, anger channeled into a professional’s deliberate focus. “You think your brother helped make this happen. To kill Lee.”

“I believe he would have found such a death convenient,” Iroh said coldly. “But as Lee was on his knees, even the Fire Lord had no excuse for a lethal blow.” He shook his head. “I am certain my brother found that very unpleasant. He preferred Lee’s sister, that I knew. How much so, I did *not* realize, until she appeared with orders to take us back in chains... alive or dead.” Iroh sought Tingzhe’s gaze directly. “She is an excellent firebender. A true prodigy. Had I been a moment slower to block her strike - Lee had *no* defense against the move she unleashed. Most believe no such defense even *exists*.”

“His *sister* tried to...?” Luli was trembling; in outrage, not fear.

You have found great fortune in your wife, Huojin, Iroh approved. *I only hope my nephew is as lucky*. “You begin, I think, to understand why my nephew has no idea what to do about Min.”

“Oma and Shu.” The professor held his head in his hands, and drew a sharp breath. Straightened his shoulders, and looked up. “You’re the tactician, General. What do you suggest?”

“*General?*” Luli and Huojin said, aghast.

“Retired,” Iroh smiled. “And - wait.” He closed his eyes, feeling at that sense of banked fire, far more controlled than Jinhai’s tiny flicker. “Someone is about to knock.”

A few more moments, and his nephew’s fist thumped the door. “Uncle? Professor?”

Tingzhe raised a brow. “Come in.”

The door opened a few inches. “I didn’t mean to interrupt, it’s just-” Zuko’s gaze swept serious faces, and he winced. “What’s hide ‘n slide?”

Ah. “Like hide and explode, I believe,” Iroh said thoughtfully. “But no explosions.”

“Oh.” Zuko still looked dubious.

“And no knives,” Meixiang put in quickly.

“Okay.” Zuko looked a bit less glum. “Thanks.” He shut the door, and retreated.

“No *knives?*” Tingzhe got out, while the other two were still gaping.

“We play rough, dear.”

“How’d you know he was coming?” Huojin inquired, still eyeing the door.

“A skilled bender can feel his element nearby,” Iroh informed him. “All firebenders carry our own fire within. My nephew can likewise sense me, when he is calm. Which is not often,” he admitted.

“So. To answer your question of why we are *here*, Madam Meixiang.... Bear with an old man a bit longer.” Spirits. In some ways, this was the hardest part.

Their children, and their lives, are at risk. They have the right to know.

“After the duel, the Fire Lord said that by refusing to fight, my nephew had shown shameful weakness,” Iroh went on. “He was banished, and sent- well. That is a tale for another time. Let us only say, the task was one I knew Lee would never survive alone. So I joined him. I hoped to keep him alive; to teach him, and mend the worst of my brother’s wounds. And I hoped, away from the Fire Nation, we might find - a chance. Something unexpected, that could be turned to our advantage.”

“I believe you had a reputation for that,” Tingzhe said dryly. “Which rather makes me wonder why your brother dared to let you run around *loose*.”

“Ah.” Iroh smiled, a bit sadly. “But I am only a sad old failure who lost his son, his position, and his will to fight. My brother would tell you so himself.”

“Lee said his father dumped him on you.” Huojin’s brows lowered in unpleasant conclusion. “He meant that, didn’t he?”

“I was grieving my son; I did not return home until some months after Lee’s mother vanished,” Iroh said levelly. “I regret that, as well. His father would not have protected him from his sister, and no one else would have dared. She is... cruel. She enjoys others’ pain. And she is very skilled at deceiving people into believing she is innocent as a koala-lamb.” He lifted a brow. “Should you see her, I advise that you run. Swiftly.”

“But she can’t get into Ba Sing Se,” Luli objected.

“Madam Luli, *we* are in Ba Sing Se,” Iroh pointed out. “I admit we had aid, but strategy and tactics are in our blood. Lee found his own way into the North Pole, into the very heart of that fortress of ice, *before* Zhao broke in with all his forces. I doubt she would ever of her own will pass as a mere refugee, but if my brother ordered her to do so, she *would*. She is *loyal* to him.” His voice dropped, sad. “Which is, in a way, the most heartbreaking fact of all. For all my brother’s flaws, his children love him, and gave him their loyalty without reservation. And he... I begin to doubt he has ever been loyal to anyone. Even our father.” Iroh gazed into memory, heartbroken. “Especially our father.”

“Your father? But that would have been-” Tingzhe cut himself off, obviously juggling names and dates in his head. “Oh my. That - I can’t even think of a word....”

“Does Lee know?” Meixiang asked quietly.

Iroh breathed in, and sighed. “Yes.” He regarded her soberly. “But I did not. And for years, Lee was too frightened to tell me what he knew. His grandfather was dead. His mother, vanished, and none would say where. And he already knew his sister saw him as an *obstacle* to be removed. He has been very frightened, for a very long time. Often he buries fear in anger, which can be useful when you are fighting for your life. But he knows he must not do so around Jinhai.”

Huojin groaned. “So basically, the kid’s scarred up inside as a wharf weevil-rat, clueless about normal nasty but don’t want to *kill* you teenagers as a badger-mole, and mean in a fight as a pygmy puma cornered by scorpion-vipers.”

“Very well put,” Iroh admitted.

“He’s going to tie Min up and leave him dangling under a bridge, isn’t he?” Luli grinned wryly.

Delighted, Iroh beamed at her. And raised an inquiring brow at Tingzhe. “Would you be offended if I suggested such to Lee? It would be far safer for Min than most scenarios I had imagined.”

“You had better not be asking what I believe you are,” Tingzhe warned, fingers tapping restlessly on one knee.

“He’s not,” Huojin said frankly. “Lee’s messed up and hot-tempered, sure. But he’s not looking for a fight.”

Luli rubbed his shoulder, eyes rueful. “Too bad for him, Min is.”

“Right,” Huojin nodded. “So what I think the general’s asking for is - what do you call it, rules of engagement?”

“Even so,” Iroh inclined his head. Regarded the professor again. “My nephew is a just and honorable young man. And he will behave as such. If someone will simply inform us what is *appropriate*.”

Meixiang held her peace, as her husband crossed his arms and eyed Iroh dubiously.

Well. No one said convincing an earthbender of something he did not wish to accept was *easy*.

At least Zuko is having fun.

Lying prone in the shadow cast by the side wing’s roof, hands braced against tiles as he listened to mutters of broken haiku, Zuko grinned. The kids currently hiding and searching in Meixiang’s garden knew he had to be *somewhere*, but they were looking down, not up.

Earth Kingdom. Heh.

Well, that wasn’t quite fair, he allowed, as Jinhai peeked behind the garden’s water barrels to discover a shrieking Lim. A lot of Fire Nation soldiers never seemed to get the knack of looking up, either.

Stupid. Air Nomads aren’t the only ones who can take the high ground.

The Dai Li might have a clue, given the way they’d dropped off the rooftops after the umbrella spirit. And wouldn’t that be ironic, having something in common with the people who’d kill him if they knew who he really was?

They fight spirits. I’ve been after the bridge to the Spirit World. And we’ve both got our orders.

Orders a lot of the rest of the world hated. Orders sanctioned by their rightful rulers; if the Earth King didn’t know *exactly* what the Dai Li were up to, he damn well *ought* to.

Yeah. He had a lot more in common with the ominous earthbenders than he liked to think....

Huh. And there they are.

He resisted the temptation to wave to the shadows a few roofs over. They probably wouldn’t appreciate it.

And I’m just fine up here. We’re playing a game.

And possibly the Dai Li recognized that. They weren't doing anything. Though they seemed to be waiting for something....

Tiles shivered under his hands, and he didn't move fast enough.

Baked clay clamped around him like a vice, and Zuko felt the weight of several people tremble through the wall and up onto the roof. "See how you like *that* move, Min!" someone sneered. "Man, you think *you're* going to be Dai Li? You didn't even feel it coming!"

Teenage boys. Hate them. Hate them all, Zuko decided, gripping red-hot fury. "I'm not Min," he growled.

"Hey... he's not," another boy said, surprised. "So what do we--"

"Doesn't matter."

Third voice, Zuko registered, breathing slow and controlled as he flattened pinned hands against the roof and stoked the fire inside. *He's in charge. He's smug-*

"He's here. Which makes him another *refugee* friend of the *family*. So he'll just have to carry the message."

Even as tiles tightened, Zuko smirked. He was pinned down. Couldn't obviously use fire. And there were three of them.

Too bad for them.

"I understand your concern," Iroh said patiently, "but--"

The study lamp flared, flame blazing up and flickering. In a deliberate pattern.

Oh no.

Hot tiles shattered, and Zuko's hands had room to move.

Come!

You didn't need to see your element to bend it. You just had to feel it.

Male voices yelled as water slapped them, and his tile prison loosened. It was all he needed.

"Get inside!"

He heard the children's startled yells, but they were far away. He had three earthbenders to deal with here and now; three young, *stupid* teenagers, who'd already shown they could bend deadly tiles, and there were innocent civilians down there--

A slash of fingers through water, and he had two streams floating over his hands. Bend and spin and *breathe*....

Ice locked four feet to the roof. The third bender yelled, feet slipping out from under him, and yelled all the way down.

If it'd been just him, Zuko would have immobilized them completely before he jumped off the

roof. But it wasn't, and while Suyin was urging Lim and dragging Jinhai back to the house, Daiyu was approaching the swearing teen with innocent intent to help-

Snarling, the teenager swatted her away with a fist of earth.

Bad move.

Zuko dodged the head-sized earth missiles with barely a thought. Blows flying his way weren't heading for the children... and there was another reason to be on the ground rather than the roof. The water was closer.

One stream whipped out, bound busy arms. Another entangled legs before the teenager could fully rise. A second freezing breath.

Down, and out.

Something whistled through air; he almost ducked.

Throwing tiles, Zuko registered through that first bolt of pain. He felt blood trickling, and dismissed it; scalp wounds always bled, and he wasn't dead yet. *It's dark, they can't possibly see well enough to be sure it's me they're hitting-*

...Damn, I really make a lousy water wall.

Wavering water slowed the tiles, but didn't stop them. He could dodge, but the kids - damn it, he just wasn't good at defense!

So attack.

Compressing water might be hard, but *moving* it was easy. Zuko swirled it into a twisting wave between himself and the tiles, using the mini-waterspout's gathering momentum to hurl them back-

And the weight of ice and bodies on a tile-stripped, fire-weakened roof, finally did *exactly* what he'd been hoping for.

Crack. Crunch.

"My robes!" Jia shrieked.

And all the tiles *stopped*.

Professor Tingzhe was beside him, standing steady as a mountain, hands shaped in a formal gesture of *halt* that probably held every inch of earth within a block still as ice. Not that the two now half-through the roof could have mustered much opposition.

"What," the professor said sternly, "is the meaning of this vandalism?"

"Not vandalism," Zuko got out, gathering water back into a swirling tentacle at his side as two little girls hit Luli's arms and started wailing. "They said they had a *message* for Min."

"Oh, *did* they." Huojin's voice dripped unpleasant implications, as he glared at the frozen teen. "Which one of you fine, *upstanding* young gentlemen hurt my daughter?"

Even frostbitten, the boy started to sweat.

“Get. Out. Of. My. Room!” Jia appeared at her window, arms circling in a vicious overhead arc-

And her two intruders, arms pinned in tiles, shot back out of the hole in her roof. And dropped.

They stopped, barely an inch above the ground. It wasn't easy to make out in the light of the lamp Meixiang had brought along, but Zuko was pretty sure Tingzhe smirked.

All of them accounted for, Zuko thought. Uncle's got Jinhai and Suyin. Madam Luli's got her kids. Time to let the Guard handle this.

Relieved, he let borrowed water flow back to the barrel, and stepped out of the line of fire. And accepted his waterskin from Iroh with a murmured, “Thanks.”

“Very restrained,” Uncle Iroh approved. “Well done.”

“I hope so, Uncle,” Zuko muttered. “There are Dai Li a few roofs north of here.”

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Three forms, Shirong thought with great satisfaction, inhaling his morning cup of tea. *Three trained earthbenders - not experienced, but they've had years of training - and Lee took them out with three forms. That he learned in a week.*

Well... three *waterbending* forms. What he'd seen from the rooftops hinted at something else, as well. Which was why he was sitting in this particular teashop, out of uniform, waiting for one of its employees to take a well-deserved break.

Not what I would have expected, at all, Shirong mused, sipping the last of his drink. *But it makes sense. I would have said it was impossible... but they're obviously here.*

Though if I am right - well, there's a kettle of eel-catfish, indeed.

Ah. Pao was stalking out to the front, which meant his target was safely out the back. Paying, the Dai Li agent disappeared into the crowd, slipped up and out of sight up a few handy walls, and descended again behind the teashop.

Mushi, he somehow wasn't surprised to note, didn't turn a hair. "Good morning," the elderly gentleman said graciously.

"So it is," Shirong agreed.

"I believe my nephew has described you well," Mushi noted. "Though I could always be mistaken."

Well, well; that's where Lee gets it, Shirong thought, amused. Not that the young waterbender could do subtle, not with his temper. But at least he could see why Lee *recognized* it. "Since I know Pao's as stingy with his breaks as everything else... I admit, when Lee borrowed that scroll, I expected him to be diligent in practice. I never expected what I saw last night from someone with no experience bending." He paused, deliberately. "Or should I say, someone with no experience with bending *forms*."

Mushi raised an eyebrow.

"Forgive the impatience of the young," Shirong said sardonically, "but how did two colonials get all the way to Ba Sing Se?"

"Very carefully," Mushi smiled. "Though it is not as unlikely as you seem to believe. Lee and I left those territories many years ago. For reasons you can likely guess," he added dryly. "Is his style that distinctive?"

"Probably not to most people," Shirong said candidly. "I've seen a fair number of waterbenders. They wait for you to come to them. Lee goes right down an enemy's throat." He raised a brow right back at the older man. "Effectively, too. I imagine he had a very good teacher." *You are not a harmless old man, and we both know it. Which makes me wonder why you're taking such pains to look like one.*

Mushi regarded him for what felt like ages, and finally sighed. "I have heard stories of the Dai Li,

as you can imagine. But I have also heard my nephew's account of you, and I believe you do not wish him harm. Though if that is so, the events of last night bear a bit of explanation."

On one hand, the Dai Li didn't have to explain themselves to anyone. On the other.... *He's fought spirits, too.* "Lee had things under control," Shirong said bluntly. "Or close enough. Though I was actually watching to see what Min would do with the rabid little upper-class boys he's managed to show up. Our nobles are a bit touchy about deference and proper place. Not that *they'd* ever stoop to be Dai Li, but spirits forbid a *refugee's* son should have the strength to qualify." He hesitated. And tried to look as if he weren't.

Ask. You'll never get a better chance.

"Is it true that generals in the Fire Nation aren't nobles?"

"Yes, and no," Mushi said levelly. "Most in high ranks are powerful firebenders, and most of those are of noble blood. But not all. Tactical gifts and the ability to bend are not always found in the same person." He smiled. "I begin to see why my nephew has allowed you so close. You are both curious of how things *might* be. If you had been born different people. If there was no war... or rumors of war."

Nice save. "I'm curious as to how Lee was born who *he* is," Shirong said pointedly.

"Lee's mother concealed her heritage," Mushi shrugged. "I learned of her healing by accident; Lee was a difficult birth. But she was my beloved sister-in-law, and I would not betray her."

Shirong's eyes narrowed, thinking of that scar. "But someone figured it out."

"No, I do not believe so." Amusement flickered in Mushi's gaze. "Lee is a poor liar, but good at keeping secrets." He sighed. "No. What you think of... was dealt not because he is a waterbender, but because he has a heart." He shrugged slightly. "I have traveled much in my life. This time, we simply traveled... further."

"I see where Lee gets his knack for understatement," Shirong said dryly. "You realize you could both be arrested as spies."

"We could," Mushi acknowledged. "I can only assure you that we are not. We are, indeed, what we seem: two refugees, fleeing... what lies outside Ba Sing Se."

With that, he was silent. Waiting.

Like Lee. He knows when to stop talking.

Who are you, really?

But it wasn't quite time to press that question. Not yet. "You're an interesting man, Mushi," Shirong stated. "We'll have to talk again sometime."

Mushi inclined his head graciously. "I hope you enjoyed your tea. I will ask Pao if he wishes to introduce more varieties of oolong."

Meaning not only had Mushi seen him in the shop, Shirong considered as he slipped back out of sight, but he'd matched teas to faces. A useful habit for any shopkeeper... or spy.

But they're not spies. No one would make someone as visible as Lee an agent.

Mushi, though....

Damn. A traveler. A colonial who knows how to fight, but can also blend in. Who knew Lee's mother was a waterbender and kept quiet - it makes sense. A lot of sense.

So. A possible spy in a position to teach, and a nephew quietly, obviously devoted to him.

Bets Lee was meant to follow in the family trade, anyone?

Settling into an out of the way corner of rooftop, Shirong leaned back for some serious thought. On the one hand, this was good news. Lee wasn't just a fair catch. He was an *excellent* catch, already primed and prepared for the hard choices and impossible situations an agent found himself dumped into without warning. On the other....

I don't think I'll tell Quan where Lee's from. Yet.

Dai Li mindbending didn't quite work on those with Fire Nation ancestry. Not the way it should. You could brainwash them, yes. It took longer, a *lot* longer, but it could be done. You could implant false memories, take over their will-

But if any command pitted them against their loyalties, they just - broke. If they didn't drop dead on the spot, they'd be dead within days. Always.

We can trust Lee, or we can kill him. No middle ground.

Which wasn't necessarily enough to disqualify the boy as a candidate. Historically, a few people had ended up in the Dai Li specifically *because* they wouldn't bend under ordinary treatment. And in almost every case, if you could trace their ancestry back far enough... well.

"Don't even joke about it, indeed," Shirong chuckled, recalling Lee's quietly frantic attempt to deflect him away from any thought of Fire Nation heritage. "One of these days, I *have* to see you in a topknot."

Someday *after* he told Quan the truth. Though how to frame that was going to be tricky. Quan was practical enough to take in a waterbender, colonial or not. Long Feng, though....

He is our leader. But Avatar Kyoshi created us to serve the city, not one man.

A thought Shirong wasn't entirely comfortable with, no matter how true it was. Long Feng had earned his right to power. He'd fought for them all, almost two decades ago, forcing back one of the darkest hordes of spirits ever to swarm within the walls. Shirong himself still carried scars from those horrible nights; Amaya had helped as many as she could, but she'd had to reserve her power for those most critically injured by fangs and claws and leech-mouths that drained chi away like blood.

The agent winced, as memory roused some of those wounds to aching. There were reasons he wasn't married. Jagged blue scars, obviously not made by ordinary teeth and claws, tended to make potential lovers... uneasy.

No. There was no question in his mind that Long Feng deserved his position. But the man sometimes seemed to focus purely on Ba Sing Se, as if the war truly did not exist. Witness their current confinement of the Avatar's sky bison. If Long Feng were so concerned about the Avatar's effect on the Earth King, wouldn't it make more sense to send the beast away, and get rid of all the trouble in one fell swoop?

I'm just an agent. I don't know what our generals are planning. Surely, they have a good reason.

And Shirong wasn't inclined to second-guess the judgment of the man who'd fought to save all their lives, that horrible moon-dark night. Compared to that, General Iroh's later siege had been a model of peace and harmony with the spirits.

For a bloodthirsty firebender, he fought cleanly. I wonder what happened to him after he broke the siege?

Nothing good, most likely, given Fire Lord Azulon had apparently named Ozai to follow him instead. And officers under Fire Lord Ozai... didn't fight cleanly.

"That poor girl," Shirong murmured, thinking of Lee's reluctant confession. The waterbender might not have given the gory details... but he could fill those in for himself. Unfortunately.

Such things had happened once or twice during the siege... but no more than that. *Prince* Iroh's response to outrages on civilians had always been swift, just, and ruthless. No plague-spirits spread in *his* wake.

Just fire, blood, and ash, Shirong thought darkly. *Half the world they've conquered, and they just won't stop. Spirits, I hate them.*

Yet he'd found hate was a very two-edged sword. He'd hated the Fire Nation so much and so deeply, mourning his people's losses, that he'd been driven to understand them - all the better to destroy them, if he had the chance. He'd studied, delved into archives, attended interrogations of the *very* few firebenders captured alive....

And one dusty afternoon in the university library had shaken him down to his bones.

Honor. Duty. Benevolence. Respect. Courage. Honesty. Righteousness.

The founding principles of the Fire Nation, according to writings left by Avatar Kyoshi herself.

It didn't change anything. He still hated them. Still intended to keep their army from disturbing the hard-won peace of Ba Sing Se. By any means necessary.

Yet deep within the hate, there was something... he didn't know what to call it. But it felt oddly sad.

A colonial waterbender is truer to their principles than their own soldiers. Shirong snorted at the irony. *Not that that will be a good argument to use on Quan.*

But Quan wasn't the real problem. Quan hated the Fire Nation as well. Long Feng....

I've seen him interrogate prisoners. He doesn't hate them. He despises them.

And something about that made Shirong very uneasy.

Focus, Shirong told himself. *You've been given time to recruit Lee. Use it. Let what he can do make his case for him.*

In the meantime, he had work to do. There might not be plague on the docks, but rumors like that didn't get started without *something* behind them. He hadn't found out what. Yet.

Time to go hunting.

Suyin tasted dusty futon again, and groaned. *I promised myself I wouldn't stare. I promised.*

Yet she had. Again. And Lee had used her distraction, *again*, to turn what should have been a simple block-and-dodge into another embarrassing defeat. And that didn't even begin to cover Jinhai's wildly flickering leaves, and random bursts of sparks.

Lee sighed, and let her up. "All right, both of you stop. It's obvious neither of you can focus today."

But his tone wasn't mean, or even exasperated, Suyin noticed, relieved. Just - patient.

"Is this about last night?" Lee raised that lone brow, eyeing them.

From his corner, her father set down his notes and politely cleared his throat. "I can understand your uncle not wanting to get into details with the Dai Li in the vicinity. But, "my nephew has reason to study with Master Amaya" leaves *quite* a few questions unanswered."

Lee took a deep breath, let it sigh out. "Spirits like to mess with me."

"You're joking." But Tingzhe didn't sound sure himself.

"I wish," Lee muttered. Raised a hand near his scar, just for a moment. "When - this happened - Master Amaya thinks it burned most of the water out of my spirit. So later, when she helped hide us - I *drowned*." Knuckles whitened, before Lee forced fingers straight. "After that, water just started... moving when I got upset." He dredged up a weak smile. "You should have seen Uncle's face."

"I can only imagine," Tingzhe murmured, dazed.

"Can I learn to freeze jerks, too?" Jinhai said eagerly.

"Ice is waterbending," Suyin reminded him. "I know Lee said he could move fire in other things, even water... no, you were napping... what?"

Lee was smiling at her. Really, truly, smiling. "Jinhai? Your sister's a genius."

"She is?" Jinhai said doubtfully.

"I am?" Suyin echoed.

"Let me get a pot," Lee said in a rush, and dashed upstairs. And came back almost before the three of them had time to blink at each other, one of Meixiang's larger metal pots half-filled with water. "If you're out in plain view, you're going to need a fire to keep people from getting suspicious. But down here, we can cheat. Jinhai, hands on the pot. Breathe, but hard, not sharp. Push the fire inside out from your hands. We want heat, not flames."

Jinhai frowned in concentration, and the first tiny bubbles stirred in water, wisps of steam starting to rise.

"Good. Keep it up. And remember how this feels," Lee directed. "If you ever end up falling through ice, this is something that can save your life." He frowned. "There's a couple of other techniques you should know for that, but you need a *lot* more control of your fire before you start those." He shrugged. "This, by itself, you can use all kinds of ways. And most people never see it coming. Can you tell me why?"

“Umm....” Jinhai chewed his lip, and shook his head.

“Think about it.” Lee looked over both of them. “What’s the difference between this and the other moves I’ve showed you?”

Moves? Suyin thought, confused. “Jinhai’s not moving.”

“Exactly.” Lee glanced at her father, dead serious. “This is one of the differences between fire and earth. Earthbending, you have to move. Firebending, your *chi* has to move. Which means, if you know what you’re doing... if you can breathe, you can bend.”

“You charred the tiles to break them,” Tingzhe realized.

“They couldn’t see my hands,” Lee said matter-of-factly. “Once I had enough room to call water up, they were toast.” He looked straight at Suyin. “Breath moves your chi. Maybe you can’t burn tiles, but if you’re trained enough, I know you could break them. And I don’t care how strong a bender is. If you can surprise them, you’ve got a chance.”

Suyin swallowed hard, warmed and shaken all at once. “Is this why the Fire Nation keeps winning?” she asked in a small voice. “They just - keep going, keep fighting....”

I’m sorry! she wanted to say, as so many eyes looked at her. *I don’t want to hurt you, any of you. I don’t know why I hurt. I just do....*

Yet Lee didn’t look angry. Just - sad. And determined, as he reached into his sleeve and took out a sheathed dagger.

It’s pretty, Suyin thought past the ache in her heart, taking in mother-of-pearl inlay, the water-steel revealed when Lee unsheathed the blade-

Never give up without a fight.

“Uncle says you have to draw wisdom from every nation,” Lee said, holding the blade so she could read it clearly. “He sent this to me before the worst days of my life.” Silent, he turned the dagger.

Made in the Earth Kingdom.

“If it wasn’t for this, I wouldn’t have made it this far.” Sheathing the blade, Lee made it vanish again, and looked at them both soberly. “You should be proud of your people. *All* of your people.”

“Your uncle is a very unusual man,” Tingzhe said thoughtfully.

A faint smile touched Lee’s face. “I guess he is.” He reached out to the pot, and nodded. “That’s hot enough. Jinhai? Watch.” Lee breathed out, and scooped-

A globe of steaming water shimmered in his palm.

“Waterbending,” Tingzhe began.

“No,” Lee shook his head. “*Firebending.*”

Suyin’s jaw dropped. *But... if he can... oh, spirits.*

“Really?” Jinhai breathed.

“Really,” Lee stated. “That’s the move you use to grab a handful of fire. There’s fire in hot water.

Move that, and you can move the water *with* it. If it's hot enough."

"You can teach Jinhai to look like a *waterbender*," Suyin blurted out, stunned. "You can - he could use this in *plain sight*...."

"Didn't I tell you you were a genius?" Lee smirked at her. Glanced at her father. "I can't teach him everything with hot water. It's a lot harder than fire. And if he runs into a *real* waterbender, they'll figure out something's up. But right now, the only waterbenders you've got to worry about are me and Amaya. So...." He grinned at them all. "Who feels like getting out of this cellar?"

Jinhai's cheer shook dust from the rafters.

"Were you scared?"

Zuko glanced at Suyin as they watched Jinhai toss a ball of hot water, giggling. "When water started pulling at me?" he guessed.

Suyin nodded. "I was thinking about it... I know bending's important to Min, and Jia, and Dad, and probably you and Jinhai too. But if the world started changing on me... I know I'd be upset. And I thought, maybe...." She shrugged, shy.

"Jinhai's very lucky," Zuko said quietly. *I wish I'd had a sister like you.* "The world fell out from under me. I didn't know what to do. What to *be*." He breathed out slowly. "But it's not the first time things... fell apart. So I kept going."

"It was bad," Suyin said plainly. "After the Agni Kai."

Wordless, Zuko nodded. Reached back, and uncapped his waterskin, drawing out a thin stream to wrap around his fingers. "At least getting better this time is a lot more fun."

Slowly, she smiled.

"But I wasn't scared. Exactly." Zuko shrugged. "I would have been, I was just... tired." He grimaced. "That happens in combat, too. You don't just get hurt and exhausted. Your spirit gets tired. Uncle says you shouldn't keep soldiers on the front more than a month, if you can. People need rest. They need to be safe."

"...Why are you telling me about soldiers?" Suyin asked, voice hushed.

I'll try to be gentle, Uncle. I just don't know if that will be enough. "Because you're good, Suyin," Zuko said honestly, streaming water back into his waterskin. "You pay attention. You ask questions. And you don't just practice until you get it right. You go over moves you've already learned, to see if you can make them better. You're good. If you keep it up, you're going to be *very* good."

Dark green eyes widened. "I don't want to be a soldier!"

Spirits aren't big on what we want. "But you want to protect Jinhai," Zuko pointed out. "I know what that's like. He's your family. You want to keep him safe." *Uncle says you're one of us. I believe him.* "I'm telling you this *in case*, Suyin. In case something goes wrong. In case *everything* goes wrong. If something happens, and you end up outside Ba Sing Se - don't let anyone tell you girls shouldn't fight. Just say you had relatives from Kyoshi Island, he's *your* little brother, and they can go to Koh's lair in a handbasket."

Suyin stared at him.

Zuko reddened a little. *Okay, not the most polite way to say it. But maybe she'll remember it.* And if she yelled *that* at some over-officious Guard, he might just stay stunned long enough for her to grab a weapon and deal with the problem herself.

Try again. “Suyin - I’m telling you because I *know* you’ll fight. So you need to know how to take care of yourself. Not just during the fight. Before it, and after. After... after is hard.” Zuko swallowed dryly. “It’s not like the plays and the hero-stories. You feel awful. You’re alive, and you’re glad you’re alive - and *that* feels awful, because someone else *isn’t*.”

Suyin paled, fists clenching.

“I’m telling you because you love them.” Zuko tried to keep his voice quiet. Gentle. “When we love people, we throw ourselves between them and the fireball. We don’t even think about it.” He took one of her hands, warming the chilled fist between his fingers. “Your mother knows what that’s like. Talk to her.”

Suyin gulped. “She’s... a professor’s wife....”

“She’s your *mother*. Never mess with a mom. They bite back.” He backed off a step, considering his options. “Just talk to her. I’ve always been in the middle of trouble. She probably has better ideas.”

Suyin nodded, obviously thinking it over. “So what do we do now?”

Zuko saw Jinhai’s globe start to wobble into a puddle, and strode over to heat it again with a touch. “Now, we figure out how to breathe with hot water.”

Jinhai stuck out his tongue. But grinned, and sat down with a dramatic sigh.

Smart kid.

“And breathe in,” Amaya directed, water-wreathed hand pressed against scarred skin. Feeling Mushi’s watchful eye, the strength of the moon rising outside the apartment with sunset, the steady pulse of chi beneath her touch. Not as swift or as strong a flow as it should be in whole flesh....

But he’s a fighter. He may be rough at the edges, but he’ll survive. Better; he’s thriving.

Satisfied, she took her hand away, letting water flow back into a basin. “I think we’re done.”

Gingerly, Zuko touched the edge of seared skin. And tried not to look disappointed. “I thought... never mind.”

“I’m a healer, not a spirit,” Amaya said plainly.

“And where it matters most, there is improvement,” Mushi stated, holding up a finger in front of his nephew’s eyes. “Follow.”

Amaya stepped back as the gray-haired firebender guided his nephew through a test Yugoda herself might have used to check peripheral vision. And smiled.

“Very good,” Mushi nodded at last. “The surface remains, but all else has improved.”

Zuko braced himself, and nodded. "Thank you."

You do mean that. But it still hurts. Amaya sighed, and touched her student's shoulder, waiting until he reluctantly met her gaze. "In the Water Tribes, a scar is not a mark of shame. It is worn with honor, and respect. It means you survived."

"It wasn't worth his time to kill a failure," Zuko muttered.

Amaya kept herself from flinching, even as she saw Mushi rein in his sorrow. The burn had been dealt by a firebender he *trusted*....

He's not a child, Amaya reminded herself. *He's sligher than many of your tribesmen, he'll never have a spearman's build, but he's of age to prove himself in war. He has, from his uncle's account.* "Forgive me. I forget, sometimes, that you're not just another healer. You're a blooded warrior. And a warrior doesn't need sympathy for the scar that failed to slay him."

Green eyes snapped to hers, startled. And, beyond the shock, calculating.

So very alike. How much of that is blood, and how much training?

Age made a difference; Mushi's gratitude was a quiet light in his eyes, while Zuko stood straighter. "So... I'll go see about that duck," Zuko said in a rush, out the door almost before he finished.

"I'm half surprised he remembered to bring water," Amaya murmured wryly.

"My nephew is always mindful of his weapons," Mushi nodded. And smiled at her. "It is hard to raise a young man, sometimes. Those we traveled with were all older men, confident in their skills...."

"And your nephew's been on the losing side of battles with children," Amaya sighed, absently spiraling water up out of the basin with a fingertip. "I've known young warriors. It speaks well of both of you that he's not bitter. Avatar or not, it can't have been easy, seeing your people brushed aside like leaves by a twelve-year-old boy." She gave Mushi a searching glance.

He inclined his head, but not without a twinkle of humor. "One day, I hope to tell you everything. But for now... yes. It has been difficult. The more so because I did not realize, at first, that my nephew believed he *should* have been able to turn the tide. It is, after all, what his father claimed he expected."

Amaya stepped back a bit, absently tossing water between her hands as she considered that deliberate opening, and how best to use it. "I meant what I said. A warrior doesn't need sympathy. He needs *revenge*."

Mushi folded his hands, careful to make no sudden movements. "That would be difficult. I myself do not think I could raise a hand against my own brother, and I am not loyal to him. Lee would be in a far more perilous position."

"There are more ways to take revenge than just killing a man," Amaya said levelly. "Sometimes I think my tribe invented most of them. It's a pity you weren't born one of us; our chief would never have known what hit him." She raised a brow at her fellow teacher. "I imagine your plan to create a sanctuary is going to be a fine revenge on *someone*. Spirits, the Dai Li, the Fire Lord himself - for all I know, all of the above. I'd never accuse you of thinking small."

Mushi was eyeing her with a delightfully wary respect. "You help those in need. Even the Fire Nation."

"I help people who happen to be of the Fire Nation," Amaya corrected. "I save lives where I can. And destroying the Fire Nation would be no more right than destroying the Air Nomads was. But even though my tribe wouldn't teach me to wage war, I will fight to defend my people." She gave him a piercing look. "Or is Lee not Water Tribe after all?"

"*Lee* may be. But my nephew-"

"They're the same." Amaya streamed water back to the basin, recalling his description of dragons she could sense but not see. "He's my student as well. It's good that he has an uncle; I am glad that he has you. But water depends on community. No one in my tribe would ever leave a young waterbender with so little family. It's just not right."

Frowning, Mushi lifted a hand to speak - then stopped, and looked aside. Let something fall from his sleeve, and regarded the lotus tile in his palm before tucking it away. "You came from one of the smaller villages. Not the North Pole itself."

"I went there to train, before I left," Amaya acknowledged, startled. "How did you know?"

"The main chiefdoms, both North and South, do not consider uncles so important. They trace inheritance through the father's line. It is the smaller villages who look not for a father, but a mother's brother." He smiled. "I would have been honored to be Ursa's brother." The smile stayed, but green eyes were deadly serious. "You believe it is blood feud, then."

"Don't you?" she said bluntly. "The Fire Lord won't take the creation of this sanctuary lightly."

"He will not." Something hardened in Mushi's gaze. "But I have reason to believe he will have more strategically critical matters to attend to."

He means that. Amaya shook her head. "If we are forced to leave Ba Sing Se, will you tell me who you are?"

"If that should come to pass, I will tell you before we leave," Mushi said quietly. "The risks are great. And would be far greater, to you, if we accepted your offer of kinship." He sighed. "I am glad you did not ask Lee directly. To protect you, he would refuse. And he would not be kind."

"Did he do that to you?" Amaya pounced.

"For years," Mushi said dryly. "*I think* I have finally convinced him he cannot be rid of me so easily. He has been far better behaved of late." A slight shrug. "Though in part, that may be due to our encounter with his sister. It is one thing to drive away one you love, to protect them. It is quite another to have them nearly taken from you, and fight desperately to keep them."

Which explained a great deal. But not, of course, everything. *If I ever find out you're keeping secrets just to keep me wondering, you old fox, you're going to find yourself treating frostbite,* Amaya decided.

Blinking innocently at her, Mushi glanced at the door. "Where is he?"

It was the yelling that drew Shirong's attention, away from the possible smears of dried blood he'd found on a carpet-seller's roof. Young, male-

"You *bastard!*"

And obviously fighting mad.

“Stop insulting my mother.”

That voice, Shirong knew. *Now what?*

“Is that your Lee?” Yunxu, the agent slated to take over the search from him for the night, looked almost awake. Which was about as interested as the man ever got in anything, outside the mindbending rooms under Lake Laogai.

“Hardly *mine* yet, but yes,” Shirong acknowledged. Peered down into the next alley, where ice glittered around a furious body. “And unless I miss my guess, that would be Jet.”

“Come over here and fight like a man!” the ragged teen yelled, pinned to a wall.

“Do I even have to answer that?” Lee stepped back, water flowing around one hand. “Wake up. You can’t win. You’re not a *freedom fighter* here. You’re a refugee, just like the rest of us. No, wait; you’re *not*. My uncle is a respectable teashop worker. I’m a healer’s apprentice. You? You’re a troublemaker, Jet. The Guard let you off with a warning once. I doubt you’ll get a second chance.” His voice dropped, quiet and confident. “Go fight on the Wall, Jet. If you have to hate, take it where it’ll do some good.”

“You think you can stand there and lecture me?” Jet demanded. “I know what you are! Murdering Fire Nation scum-”

Water cracked, whip-fast. A fine red line parted on Jet’s cheek, welling tiny beads of crimson.

So he’s been working on the water whip as well, Shirong thought, satisfied. *Good.*

“For once in your life,” Lee said, low and cold, “*Think*. If I’m murdering, sadistic, Fire Nation scum - scum that has you *pinned and helpless*, that knows *exactly* how to dismember you and leave the frozen pieces where only the scavenger lizard-birds will find them - *why are you still alive?*”

Jet’s jaw worked, but no sound came out.

“Goodbye.” Turning on his heel, Lee stalked off.

Shirong smirked, watching Jet squirm fruitlessly in ice. *The kid has style.*

“Should have killed him,” Yunxu said disinterestedly. “I know the type. He’s not going to shut up until he’s dead or mindbent.”

“Do you want me to take him in?” Shirong said neutrally. Altering minds might be necessary, but he didn’t exactly enjoy it. Not the way Yunxu’s associates did.

“No need.” Yunxu sounded almost amused. “Why waste a good setup?”

Shirong inclined his head, acknowledging the truth of that. Spirits were drawn to those already touched by the spirit world. If the creature they were seeking was a predator-

And it probably is.

-Then if it wasn’t stupid or arrogant enough to attack Lee himself-

And it probably isn’t. Not while he’s with people.

-The next best thing would be a human touched by Lee’s bending. A pinned, helpless, *angry* young man, bent on disturbing the peace of Ba Sing Se.

“Enjoy your night,” Yunxu waved as Shirong left.

“No,” Shirong murmured, once he was certain Yunxu wouldn’t hear. Thinking of spirits, and a troublemaker turned unwilling bait, and the young waterbender who might well have put a merciful dagger through Jet’s heart rather than leave him as a kamuiy’s prey. “No, I don’t think I will.”

“You really put your foot in it this time, Jet,” Smellerbee grumbled, working with Longshot to chip their leader free. Or should that be, former leader? Jet wasn’t exactly taking charge the way he used to.

Then again, maybe he was. But leading here wasn’t like being in charge in the tree village. Grownups didn’t listen to Jet.

And given what he’d been doing, Smellerbee was starting to wonder if she should, either....

She yawned, and shook herself. Prodded Longshot, when the archer seemed dazed. This was no place to nap. Not with Jet in trouble.

“Too scared to finish me off. He must have guessed you guys would be behind me,” Jet said confidently. “The next thing we should do is-”

Longshot flicked him in the forehead.

“What was that for?”

“He’s right,” Smellerbee growled. “Lee was about as *scared* as Sokka was. Remember him? The kid who didn’t want you to hurt an old guy?”

“That old man was *Fire Nation!*”

“So what?” Smellerbee burst out. “And so what if Mushi is? He’s making tea! That’s all he does. All day! Who’s that hurt, huh? Come on!”

“We don’t let the Fire Nation win! We don’t just leave them alone....” Jet’s voice trailed off. Something seemed to whisper through the air, chill and tasting of salt.

Smellerbee traded a glance with Longshot, and started chipping faster.

She had one arm free, and Longshot had mostly broken Jet’s legs loose. But the older boy didn’t move. Instead, Jet seemed to cock his head, as if listening to something they couldn’t hear. “... Dad?”

Jet’s parents were dead. Smellerbee knew that, the same as she knew about every one of the Freedom Fighters’ lost ones. Just as she knew the wind somehow had a sound like waves lapping on the great lake, coming with the shadow suddenly at the mouth of the alley. A shadow that felt lonely, felt wrong... but Jet was straining toward it, breaking the last of the ice-

“Get away!” Smellerbee yelled, and didn’t care how shrill her voice was, or how puny the knives felt in her hands. Longshot was holding their struggling friend back, and she was all they had. “Get lost! You’re not his father. Get out of here!”

Something chuckled, like seawater through rocks. Long black stretched out like an arm-

A door slammed open. “Here now! What’s all this noise....”

Footsteps. The shadow drew closer.

“...Do I know you?”

Grabbing Jet's arm, Smellerbee ran. And didn't look back.

“You fell asleep?” Quan said neutrally.

Yunxu dropped to his knees. “I have no excuse.”

Studying traces left behind, Shirong tried not to glance at either of them. Quan was hard, but fair. “I wouldn't say there's an excuse, but there may be a reason.”

Quan crouched to look at drying bits of twisted brown, not touching them any more than Shirong had. “Seaweed?”

“Smells like it,” Shirong nodded.

Quan let out a slow breath. “Not good.”

Now there was an understatement. All water spirits were unpredictable, and tended toward extremes; a river spirit mild as milk toward its denizens might be lethal as a typhoon to invaders. But of all the kamui bound to water, those of the sea were the worst. At their mildest, they were uncaring. Those strong enough to put a trained Dai Li to sleep... well.

I was right. We're dealing with a man-eater.

Had to be. Nothing else would draw a sea-spirit this far from the shore. Salt was scarce; human lives were packed in like the anchovies in the schools off the eastern shore, that boiled water with their bodies. Lonely, desperate people, half of whom didn't even believe in spirits. The balance of the world was upset, and Ba Sing Se was full of prey.

Sometimes I hate my job, Shirong thought grimly. “Has anyone talked to the waterbenders on the docks? They're not spirit-touched, but they are benders. They may have noticed something-”

“They're gone,” Quan said grimly.

“Gone?” Shirong echoed uneasily, as Yunxu finally got to his feet.

“Not a trace of violence,” Quan went on, eyeing seaweed as if it might burst into flames. “Looks like they started vanishing a week ago. We have reports that some said they'd seen an old friend, and had to go. Others... it's as if they just got up from whatever they were doing and walked away. Of course, they worked with fish. No one would notice a few water-weeds.”

No. They wouldn't. “Old friends,” Shirong wondered. “Shapeshifter?”

“Probably.” Quan didn't look happy at the thought. As well he shouldn't. It narrowed the field of possibilities considerably... but all of those left were lethal.

“And a smart one,” Shirong added, half to himself. “It knows what it's vulnerable to.”

“Or who's vulnerable to it,” Yunxu put in levelly. “Water pulls both ways.”

Waterbenders. Shirong tried not to flinch. “Sir-”

“I’ve already placed a watch on Healer Amaya’s clinic,” Quan informed him, brows lifting slightly. “Calm down.”

“I don’t think it’s the healer he’s worried about,” Yunxu said dryly. “He hasn’t given us any oaths yet, Shirong. You shouldn’t get attached.”

“I’m not,” Shirong said sharply. “Just worried. Lee wasn’t raised Water Tribe. If this is a spirit they’d know about, he’ll have no idea how to protect himself.” He glanced at Quan. “And he’s fairly good at spotting us. If we put a watch on him, he may notice, and try to lose them.” Which might run him straight into a kamui’s jaws.

“So tell him not to,” Quan said bluntly. “*If* you think he can keep it to himself. The last thing we need is a panic while the Avatar’s here.”

“Some bridge to the spirit world,” Shirong muttered. “Second outbreak of malicious spirits in as many weeks, and he hasn’t noticed anything?”

“He’s twelve,” Quan said dryly. “And he’s an airbender. The Grand Secretariat practically had to hit him over the head with a rock before he noticed you’re not supposed to bother the Earth King with the world outside the walls. And he’s a *monk*. If the stories are right, he was raised in a temple, by people who prided themselves on being *spiritually aware*. There probably wasn’t a malevolent kamui within miles.”

Point. Spiritual awareness was well and good. But you had to have something really try to kill you before you developed the spiritual *sensitivity* to know when Something Nasty wanted you for dinner.

Which is why we’re not monks, Shirong thought wryly. “Given this is now a larger search, sir...”

“I’m reassigning agents to take it over, and we have the Guard looking for Jet and his associates,” Quan said matter-of-factly. “Work on your recruits.” Brown eyes were shadowed. “We need them now more than ever.”

“I don’t usually bring swords to healing sessions,” Zuko observed, following Shirong down through the earthbent tunnel toward an open chamber of green-glowing crystals. *A city under the city. Why am I not surprised?*

Wait. “There’s water down here,” Zuko breathed, feeling it tug, cool without the touch of sun.

“Quite a bit. That’s why I want you armed,” Shirong said plainly. “As long as there’s something out there, don’t rely on just bending as your only defense.”

I never have. “Something?” Zuko asked pointedly. “You can’t be a little more specific?”

“If I could, we’d be halfway to catching it.” Shirong stopped, just outside an area of more crystals and stronger light. “Go to the left, and stay out of sight. Unless someone gets overenthusiastic and needs your help, I’d prefer it if they had no idea that you’re here.”

Zuko nodded once. “You want to see who’s paying attention to the earth, not just their eyes.”

Smirking a little, Shirong stalked forward.

Zuko waited a few breaths for Shirong to draw their attention, then eased into the cavern, sticking to the shadows cast by the odd half-light of the crystals. Hands tucked into his sleeves, he sat down

to watch the mayhem; just another irregular lump on the cavern wall. *Think they missed me.*

Not that that was such a great accomplishment. Between the crashes, the grating of bent rock, and the playful sparring assaults of various Dai Li agents, the young men in front of him probably would have missed a whole regiment marching through.

A figure in the center caught his eye, narrowly dodging a flung rock glove. *Min.*

Damn. Given what Shirong had told him about something that might be *eating* waterbenders, this could make things tricky.

Just keep out of sight, Zuko told himself, surreptitiously heating his waterskin. Amaya had walked him through healing with water instead of fire, but it always seemed to drain him if the water wasn't warm. *Decide on your story, make it simple-*

Flesh moved slower than rock, and someone screamed.

Here we go.

There's at least four who won't make the cut, Shirong thought, looking at those lined up against the wall out of the action. More than four were injured; some of those Lee was treating had real promise, they just needed a bit more vigorous training to learn when *not* to jump in front of flying rocks. And one of those Shirong had decided was out hadn't a scratch on him; that young man just glared out of a body-bind of rocks, after he'd deliberately shoved one of the others into the path of a rising earth pillar.

The Army can have that one, Shirong thought darkly. If you couldn't trust one of your own to behave honorably in sparring, you definitely couldn't trust them against spirits-

What's this?

One of the possibles still standing had just done a startled double-take, and was now marching toward Lee with mayhem in his eyes. "What are *you* doing here?" Min Wen hissed.

"My job." Unfazed, Lee finished sealing his patient's nasty gash, glints of color fading out of water as he bent it back into his waterskin. "Looks like they're interested in you. Congratulations."

Min's eyes narrowed. "Like you really mean that."

Bad blood between them? With all the time Lee's spent at the Wen house? Why? Casually, Shirong drifted closer.

Lee sighed. "Yes, I do. If this is what you want to do with your life, good." He looked into the distance. "At least somebody's life came out the way they planned it."

"You shouldn't *be* here," Min said tautly.

"I'd say it's fortunate for you he is," Shirong said levelly, snickering to himself as Min jumped. "Next up is partner work. And it looks like we're one short."

"You want me to-" Min caught the look in his eyes, and swallowed the rest of his protest. "Yes, sir."

Lee looked equally dubious, if more relaxed. "Steel or bending?"

One of the other survivors snorted. “You think you can fight earthbenders with *swords*?”

“I’ve done it before.”

Not a boast. Not a trace of swagger. Just a simple, level statement. Shirong hid a smirk, knowing more than half the young men here simply wouldn’t believe it.

Their loss.

Min didn’t look as if he doubted it, though. Interesting.

“It’s a spar,” Shirong said plainly. “No killing. No maiming. Outside of that... keep yourself and your partner in one piece.” He waved them toward the others, and watched as Agent Bon picked the first set of pairs to compete.

“Begin!”

Min has no idea what he’s doing.

Zuko grimaced, batting a flying rock away as he ducked. Oh, Min knew earthbending. He wasn’t too bad at sparring, either. Though the whites of his eyes were getting a bit too visible for Zuko’s comfort, and if his moves were any more predictable, you could have set a clock by them.

Which was probably the only thing that had kept them in the game this long. Zuko could work *around* Min, knowing where *not* to be. There wasn’t any other option; Min had no clue how to work with a partner.

At least, not one that’s not an earthbender-

Earth trembled near his feet. Zuko slipped sideways away from the opening rift, nudging Min’s shoulder with his own to warn him of the oncoming threat.

Min flinched, and earth roared.

No!

Reflex crossed blades in front of him to ward off his own partner’s blow; he *needed* fire, needed a shield, but he *couldn’t*-

Water crashed down.

Zuko held his breath through the wave, rising as it receded, some still lapping hungrily at his sandals. Min was down and coughing, in no shape to defend himself. Their opponents hadn’t been hit nearly as hard; they were damp and wary, but stamped feet to yank up stones to punch-

Wet stones.

Zuko spun in place, swords slashing to swirl up waves as he would a storm of fire. Lashed out, letting water call to water, thirsting for *movement* and *surface-creatures* and *life*-

Stone and water and bodies *froze*.

I win.

It wasn’t over yet. They still breathed. And it’d take so, so little to surge water into gasping lungs,

and drain *everything*....

No!

Zuko *shoved* ice back into steaming water, dropping to his knees in formal surrender. “Shirong! Shirong, it’s here!”

“Everyone hold!” the agent’s voice snapped out, before freed rocks could pummel him. “Lee! Where?”

Water *yanked* at him, cruel as the ocean in a surging typhoon. Enemies; he was surrounded by enemies. But the tide would carry him, strong and sure and forever. All he had to do was slip into the cold....

No! Let go!

Silent, mocking laughter. Cold and seawater and cruelty, and it *had* him, sure as a frozen riptide. Pulling him under, sealing hope and heart away in ice....

Don’t think. Just do.

Eyes closed, Zuko let his dao fall. Brought his hands up before his mouth, remembering another lethal sea of ice. And *breathed*.

Breath of fire.

With luck, his hands would hide the tiny flames. Without....

Zuko breathed again, fighting the chill in his blood. *If this thing gets me, I’m dead anyway.*

In, and out, and let chi fan the flames inside to a bonfire-

Something snapped, a chain of ice shattering. Zuko sagged, barely feeling rough stone gloves catch him.

“You’re freezing.” Shirong’s voice was cold as any ambushed commander. “Where is it?”

“The water,” Zuko managed, trying to turn toward that channel etched in stone. “It’s... moving away....”

“On it,” Agent Bon said grimly, leading a green charge along the sides of the canal. “Get the waterbender out of here.”

Zuko felt Shirong’s nod, but didn’t have time to flinch before he was pitched over the agent’s shoulder. “I can walk!”

“Who’s walking?” Shirong’s stance shifted, and earth shot up under them, rocks parting before them with a grinding moan.

Sunlight.

It blazed down Zuko’s nerves, burning through ghosts of ice. Searing away the strength of the sea’s uncaring cruelty, unearthing worry and fear and the pain of having his family shattered.

But it was *his* pain. Not the alien *thing* that had ripped through him from the water, turning his ally into something that would have destroyed them all.

Zuko clung to his scars, and breathed.

Reluctant footsteps. “Is he going to be all right?” Min wondered.

Shirong raised a brow, accepting Lee’s dao from the teenager. The healer himself was seated within grabbing range, closed eyes turned to the sun, meditating as if his life depended on it.

And it very well might.

“He’s warmed up, and he’s not wandering off to get eaten,” the agent said practically. “So far, those are good signs.” Wiping a rag down steel to dry it, he clicked the blades together. “I’m hoping he’ll be coherent soon. Any clues we can get to the nature of this kamuïy would help.” Though he suspected speed was no longer a factor. Not when Bon and his men had come up empty-handed.

“It’s dark water,” Lee rasped.

Shirong let out a relieved breath. “Are you all right?”

“Cold.” Lee cleared his throat, and opened tired eyes to glance around the little-used palace garden they’d surfaced in. “But it’s gone. Doesn’t like sunlight.”

Shirong nodded, adding that to the scant list of what they knew about this creature. “What else?”

“Felt like the sea. Like staring down into deep water, where nothing’s alive, not even seaweed....” Lee shuddered. “The middle of the ocean. Where there’s no one to help. No one to care if you live or die. You’re *alone*.”

“Is that how it’s luring people?” Shirong asked levelly.

Lee shrugged, hands spread; *how the hell should I know?* “It got me when I - thought I was outnumbered.”

“When Min hit you,” Shirong said bluntly. *And you thought you really were alone.*

“Hey!” Min protested. “He’s the one who got caught by a spirit!”

“What part of *keep your partner in one piece* did you not understand?” Shirong said sharply. “I wanted you working with Lee for a *reason*.” He shook his head. “We didn’t expect an attack, but we knew something might happen. Given your demonstrated level of skill, I thought you’d be the most capable partner Lee could have.”

Silence. Min’s gaze slid away, and he swallowed.

Angry and embarrassed, Shirong judged. *Good. You screwed up, Min. Learn from it.*

“It got me through the water,” Lee said quietly. “I was fine with my waterskin. But when I was... scared, and reached out to the channel... sunless water. That’s where it’s strong. It - tried to pull me under. *Inside*. Through my bending.” He drew deliberate breaths. “It wanted to drown everyone. It’s hungry, and cold, and it tried to - to *use* me, wrapping its power around mine....” Lee’s voice trailed off, and he paled.

“What?” Shirong asked, alert to danger.

“That’s what he did.” Lee’s fists clenched, rage glittering in fire-green eyes. “*That’s* what he did,

that's why they died, that-!"

The punch to unsuspecting ground didn't shock Shirong, though the amount of dust raised took him aback. Yet even that didn't give him nearly as much pause as the occasional crackling words in Lee's sudden stream of curses; a litany of odd, sea-touched foul language that almost made him want to cover Min's innocent ears.

Oh. My. A waterbender who curses with Fire Nation High Court archaisms. Half of which Shirong didn't recognize, despite his study of that people's odd second language. *You're lucky I already know what you are.*

"-Parents probably got *drunk* on a *moonless midnight*-"

Shirong's brows climbed. "Back up," he mouthed at Min, waving a warning hand to be sure the teenager got the message. The Fire Nation took lineage seriously. For Lee to be implying what he was - oh my, indeed. "You've seen this before?" he said neutrally.

Lee's fists hit the ground again, knuckles bone-white, anger rising off him in a heat-haze. But he stared into the distance, jaw clenched, hauling in his runaway temper like an anchor chain. "Something like it. Once." Green eyes closed, conjuring up painful memory. "A waterbender - wanted to hurt the Fire Nation. He *let* a spirit take him over. The ships... those men had no warning, no chance, I-"

"They were *Fire Nation*," Min growled.

Bad call, Shirong winced.

"They were people!" Lee blazed. "When the Dragon of the West broke through the Outer Wall, he let people surrender! This - this *thing*-" He swallowed, and went on, voice thick with horror. "You look into the water, and all you see is broken ships and broken men. And you can't help them. You can't help anyone...."

He's on the edge. Pull him back. Kneeling by the healer, Shirong put a hand on his shoulder. "It's over," he said quietly. "You're alive. And you can help *us*, Lee. If something like that is loose here, we need all the help we can get."

"But if we could turn it against-" Min started.

"Don't even *breathe* that," Shirong said coldly, boring into the teen's gaze with his own until Min paled. "In fact, you're going to forget this conversation ever happened. Or you will *forget it ever happened*. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir." But Min still looked unconvinced.

"He doesn't understand." Anger was fading from Lee's voice, swamped by exhaustion. "Guess they don't teach the laws of war at the university."

"Like war has any laws," Min snorted.

"Actually, it does," Shirong informed him dryly. *Leave it to the Fire Nation to write them down. And hold to them. Mostly.* "The one Lee's thinking of, the most basic, is the reason it would be suicide for Ba Sing Se to do what you're suggesting. It's called the *law of reprisal*." He raised a brow. "In short, don't do to others what you don't want blasted right back in your face."

"Humans don't get the spirits involved in our wars," Lee said bluntly. "Spirits *aren't human*. They

don't recognize honorable surrender; they don't even recognize someone just trying to run away. We're supposed to honor them, and they're supposed to leave us alone to go on with our lives. Mostly. And if we dishonor them, they're supposed to go after the humans who broke the rules. *Those people. Specifically.*" His voice dropped. "Not that they've been holding up their side, lately."

"The definition of *broke the rules* can be very flexible for malevolent kamuiy," Shirong said dryly. "In essence, Min? The Fire Nation must not know what happened, or there'd be nothing but ice and ash where the North Pole used to be. But if they ever do find out - given they're *probably* not insane enough to pull the same kind of stunt with a fire spirit, this waterbender's actions would force the Fire Nation to treat *every* waterbender as if he might do *exactly the same thing*."

"Which means the Water Tribes die," Lee said flatly. "Though maybe you'd think that's a good thing. Take some of the pressure off the Earth Kingdom. For a while."

Min, Shirong was grimly pleased to note, looked practically gray. "But - they were defending themselves!"

"How the hell do you know that?" Lee said harshly. "You *weren't there!*"

But you were, Shirong reflected. *What happened? When? Why haven't we heard of it?*

And why did he have a sense of holding puzzle pieces and just not recognizing their edges?

"The Water Tribes got lucky," Lee said, half to himself. "The Fire Nation's already looking for that waterbender. Hard." He glanced at Shirong. "If that thing pulls me in, and I can't get out-"

"We'll do what has to be done."

Lee nodded, accepting that grim promise.

"Which is another thing you should consider, before you think of spirits as weapons." Shirong eyed Min. "The kamuiy we're hunting would have killed us all. How many of the Water Tribes were destroyed because of what they unleashed?"

"Spirit or fire, dead's dead," Min objected. But he didn't sound quite as certain.

"Oh, no," Shirong said, deadly calm. "No, Min. If you want to be Dai Li, learn this, and learn it well. There are worse fates than death. Much, much worse."

That gave the boy pause for thought. *I hope it lasts*, Shirong reflected, snaring a palace servant to escort Min out. *He's got potential. But if he can't think of the consequences....* The agent sighed.

Lee, he was slightly amused to note, was still sitting in the sunlight. Breathing. "That's a firebending meditation, isn't it."

Lee glanced at him, and away. "It helps."

"It doesn't like fire." Shirong nodded, adding that fact to the rest. And tried not to shiver. "Haima-jiao."

"What?"

"Assuming the worst? That's what we might be dealing with." Shirong frowned. "There's not much in the archives about them. They're sea-spirits, and usually we're too far inland to draw

them. But in the time of Chin the Conqueror one supposedly followed a trail of shipwrecks up to the lakes. They're shapeshifters, predators. Usually they pick off people lost or stranded on the shore, or already drowning. And they hate sunlight, and fire."

"Think I'm going to burn lamps around Amaya's well," Lee said, half to himself.

"Couldn't hurt," Shirong acknowledged. Paused, and gave the younger man a deliberate look. "Who's the waterbender?"

Lee hesitated.

Odd. "Don't tell me he's a relative...."

"No!" Lee looked horrified by the thought. And wearily resigned. "No. It's just... you'd never believe me." His voice dropped. "No one would."

I wouldn't? Why wouldn't I-

Puzzle pieces clattered into place, and Shirong looked at his chain of conclusions with dread. *A waterbender the Fire Nation was already searching for. A waterbender they're already prepared to throw armies against to destroy. A waterbender Lee doesn't think anyone will believe something so horrible of....*

A waterbender we welcomed into the Inner Ring itself. Because he destroyed the Fire Navy.

The Avatar.

He's supposed to be the bridge to the spirit world. To enforce balance between the nations. To protect humans.

He's not supposed to let the spirits use him. Ever.

Yet if he believed Lee - and Shirong *did* believe Lee - the Avatar had done just that.

And he's in my city. Being kept in my city.

What the hell do I do?

First things first. "We'll get you home."

Lee shook his head, eyes sad. "The clinic. Uncle - he's not going to be home yet."

Grief, Shirong recognized. "You've lost someone."

"Hasn't everyone?"

Point. "The clinic, then. I believe you have something there I need returned."

Lee tensed, then deliberately made his face calm. "Master Amaya and I found the scroll very useful."

You think I'm just going to take it. Whoever had you in their keeping before your uncle, they treated you shabbily, indeed. "Come with me."

Through doors and down corridors; some public, others most definitely not. Those Dai Li lucky enough to have families lived elsewhere. For most, though, barracks under the palace close to their

king were good enough.

But barracks weren't the only rooms down here. Shirong led Lee into one of the archives, and stepped aside to see the look on his face.

Surprise. Wonder, as Lee took in end-caps of blue, green, red, and orange. The whole room should have been lit from the force of it. "These are all..."

"Avatar Kyoshi left us very well prepared for our duties," Shirong smiled in satisfaction. "And we've expanded our library since."

Lee smirked, muttering something under his breath that sounded like *pirates*. Looked over shelves of scrolls with fierce longing. "Have you copied these?"

Interesting question. Particularly given he'd deliberately loaned Lee one of the older scrolls. "Why do you ask?"

"You should make caches. At least three or four. Some outside the city." Lee gave him a sober look. "This is the greatest treasure in Ba Sing Se. It shouldn't be lost if... if something goes wrong."

Shirong laughed once, softly, another part of the puzzle becoming clear in face of that hunger to *know*. "You're not at the Wen house for Min at all, are you? You've been seeing Professor Tingzhe."

"I like history." Lee's smile was quiet. "It's not like I can afford the university... he's been giving me lessons. And I've been teaching Jinhai."

Damn. Shirong gave him a hard look. "Jinhai's a waterbender?"

Lee grimaced, accepting the rebuke. "I didn't want to tell you earlier; I don't want word to get out to people I don't know. The whole family's upset. Especially Min. He thought Jinhai would get him kicked out of being recruited. And the university..."

"If they knew, the family would be in for hard times," Shirong acknowledged. "But you know the boy's in danger."

"They don't have a well, Jinhai's six and not allowed out after dark, and he bends with hot water," Lee said frankly. "He's probably safer than I am. *He's* never been marked by the spirits. And Suyin would shove a flaming spear right down the bastard's throat."

Reasonable arguments. Still. "Next time, tell me there's something I need to know. We almost lost you. Remember?"

"You're right," Lee acknowledged quietly. "Sorry. I screw up when I get surprised."

And being told there was a waterbender-eating spirit out there was definitely a surprise. Fair enough. "Think it through next time." Shirong let himself smile slightly. "As for caches... I imagine you're not familiar with earthbending printers, where you're from." He waited, watching.

"Exact copies," Lee realized. "As close as you can bend it to what you see. And if you can make print blocks...." Delight bloomed in green eyes.

"We've done a lot more than make a few caches," Shirong agreed dryly. "If you think you're leaving here empty-handed while there's a lethal kamui out there, you're out of your mind."

Though one thing still bothered the agent, as Lee almost smiled.

What the hell were you doing at the North Pole?

“I made dinner, Uncle Mushi.”

Setting down his traveling box and hat, Iroh nodded. *So. We are being observed more closely than normal.* He’d thought he suspected a few shadows on nearby roofs. “I appreciate that, nephew.”

“...I miss him, too.”

“I know you do.” Iroh smiled sadly, and moved in for a fragile hug. “I know that you do.” He looked up into worried eyes. “What has happened?”

“It’s not-” Zuko saw the look in his eyes, and winced. “Something tried to make me kill people....”

“Haima-jiao,” Iroh said thoughtfully sometime later, after a stumbling explanation and a slightly scorched dinner. “The lurer. Yes, I have heard of them.” He frowned, stroking his beard. “It must have come up from Chameleon Bay. The western route would be far too chill.”

“But it’s dark water,” Zuko objected.

“A spirit of ocean’s darkness, yes,” Iroh nodded. “But if tales are true, its chill is not that of ice, but of an emptiness of life. It is a spirit of the deserts of the sea; of warm water, warm oceans, that lack the rich bounty of the poles and flowing currents. The haima-jiao lairs beyond the sun’s touch, ever hungering for what it cannot have. But when that great fire retreats, it looks upon the shores, and it hates.” He nodded, recalling texts studied years ago. “Fire is its enemy. Fire, and family. It promises an end to pain - but the end it means is eternal. It lies, nephew. Never forget that.”

“I knew it had to be, but....” Zuko swallowed. “I didn’t know spirits could *do* that.”

“Most cannot,” Iroh assured him. “Which is why Agent Shirong is, unfortunately for us all, likely to be right. A haima-jiao would have the power to twist water against you.” He sighed. “Most spirits do not have that power... and most benders, even those touched by the spirits, are not powerful enough to be so vulnerable.”

“I’m not powerful.”

How little you know. “You have the determination to drive flesh and bone beyond where others fail, and perish,” Iroh said bluntly. “Your will is stronger than your body.” He smiled wryly. “Usually, this is an advantage.”

“Perfect,” Zuko grumbled. “So how do I fight this thing? Salt’s only going to make it laugh.”

“With fire, and with family,” Iroh said firmly. He gripped the young man’s shoulder. “You are never alone, nephew. There are those who love you, and wish you well. And they are not only myself and Master Amaya. Huojin, Luli, Tingzhe, Meixiang; even young Suyin and Jinhai. They care. Even if I were lost, they would take you in.”

Zuko did not look convinced.

I suppose I cannot blame him. He does not know some of them know the truth. And while we are watched, I cannot tell him.

But the young man sighed, and tried to push his doubts aside. “I miss him, too,” Zuko said quietly.

“And - I don’t know if today’s a good day to tell you this, but when I drowned....”

Ping thinks Lu Ten is cute. Close to death, was close to the spirit world. “Tell me,” Iroh said gently. “Tell me everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Haima-jiao - “sea horse-scaly dragon”. Loosely based off the Celtic *each uisge* (water horse). Very nasty critter.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Never. Letting Katara. Drag me out for girl stuff. Again.

Still smarting from those horrible girls the other day, Toph stalked down into the better end of the Outer Ring, on the hunt for truth in a city built on lies. And hoped she'd know it when she felt it.

"I'm looking for stonework," she'd told the Joo Dee currently watching over them when she left. "Buildings, carvings, fountains... I'll know it when I feel it," she said impatiently when the creepy smiling woman tried to interrupt. "The Avatar's got to have the best earthbending training. I can't just sit back and teach Aang everything I know. I've got to keep looking. See if there's a technique I don't know."

All of which was true. None of which had kept the woman and her Dai Li friends from following anyway. Which suited Toph just fine.

I am the greatest earthbender in the world. We'll see who out-stubborns who.

So here she was, hours later, walking down into the cool of a stone-carver's establishment. Reaching out with her bending, Toph felt marble, agates, quartz... and jade. *All right!*

"Can we help you, Miss?"

"You may," Toph nodded to the owner, and held up one of the ornaments she and Katara had used to crash that awful party. It'd been tricky, getting straight answers at moments she'd be pretty sure she wouldn't be overheard. "I'd like to talk with Luli."

"It doesn't look as though it needs repair... are you looking for a match?"

"I'm looking for a *carver*," Toph said impatiently. "She did something interesting with the flaw in this jade, and I want to pick her brains."

"There's no flaw in that jade-"

"There's no flaw *you* can see," Toph said pointedly. "Believe me, I can feel it. But she made the piece work with it. I want to know how." She drew up her best highborn manners, and folded her arms. "You'll both be paid for your time."

"...Right this way, ma'am."

Eel's-bed apartment design, Toph recognized, following the owner through the shop, into his family's living quarters, and out into a garden full of kids giggling and studying lessons between patches of green-smelling things. Her feet told her walls ahead formed the mirror image of the building she'd just left; the garden was the center of a whole block, with shops fronting the streets and dwellings sandwiched safely between.

Scared people. I don't like this city. At all.

Katara and Sokka and Aang might need the break, after being chased across half the planet. She hadn't been, and she'd joined up with their wild bunch for *adventure*. Tromping across new

patches of ground. Bending rocks she'd never felt before against real bad guys, not just opponents in the ring. And yes, even marching blind and thirsty across deserts, not knowing if she'd make it out alive. Her parents had bundled her up like a blind china doll, and she wanted *out*.

And what had Aang done? Dropped them into a city under siege, a city where nobody would *listen* to them. And now he was just waiting, hoping to find Appa and get the Earth King to actually read his petition, when you didn't need eyes to see that Long Feng was the guy in charge and he didn't want a damn thing to do with any invasion plans.

Avatar or not, Aang was an airbender. He'd do just about *anything* rather than hit a problem head-on.

And I don't know what's the best thing to do yet, Toph admitted to herself, placing feet precisely on gravel. *I could bust some heads, but if the others aren't right behind me, what's that going to solve? And Aang's not going anywhere without Appa.*

There had to be a way out of this. She just had to figure out who to bury in rocks to find it.

"Luli!" the owner said brightly, as they approached an oasis of relatively calm youngsters. And shade, Toph recognized, feeling the sudden coolness in the air. "This young lady would like to ask you questions about stone-carving." From the shift of his feet, he was gleefully rubbing fingers together to indicate coins.

Idiot. I'm blind, not a moron. "I am Toph Bei Fong, of the Bei Fong family," Toph said with her best society attitude, coupled with the practical touch of one merchant dealing with another. "I have specific questions in regard to the carving on this piece." She held up the hairpin. "I think this will take at least a half an hour of your time."

Toph felt the owner's face fall, as the busybody realized he couldn't be away from the storefront that long. Hid a smirk, as he stuttered something meant to be obsequiously polite and hurried off. Waited until his footsteps thumped away, and grinned at Luli. "Is he always that bad?"

Luli giggled, and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Sometimes? He's *worse*." She whistled, and four sets of younger feet scampered in from various parts of the garden. "Toph Bei Fong, these are my daughters, Lim and Daiyu...."

"Hi," from someone about her age, and "Eep!" from a girl a few years younger-

"Are you blind?"

Much younger. Sounded like a little boy, though Toph wasn't quite sure.

"Jinhai!" An older girl's voice; probably about Katara's age. "Please forgive my little brother, Lady Bei Fong. We keep trying to teach him manners but it hasn't stuck yet."

Which sounded like a Katara kind of thing to say. But there was something else in her voice that made the earthbender prick up her ears. Something she'd heard before, somewhere.... "Hey, at least he knows the truth when he sees it." Toph stuck out a hand. "Toph."

"Suyin." The girl shook hands with a *good* grip, not the flimsy little flutter upper-class Ba Sing Se approved of. "Don't let us bother you, we're just visiting."

"Aww," Jinhai muttered.

Sounded like there was a story there. But it also sounded like even Jinhai was wary enough not to

tell it to a complete stranger. Toph smirked a little, and turned toward Luli. “You’re not a bender. This was carved. So how’d you find the flaw?”

“Well... first, that’s Apple Mountain jade,” Luli said practically, as kids scattered again. “It has wonderful color, but a lot of it does have flaws. Usually, right in the heart of the best green in it....”

Sitting down on a raised stool of stone, Toph listened to an expert talk rock. *This* was the kind of thing she needed to teach Aang. You couldn’t just learn the moves and think you knew everything. You had to study your element. Poke at it. Play with it. *Listen* to it. And listen to people who knew what they were doing. Benders or not.

“...So instead of carving the flaw out to give a large piece with an awkward hole, I tapped a cut to extend the flaw, and let it cleave,” Luli finished practically. “The color left wasn’t the best, but I like how I was able to carve it into sun-dappled leaves....” Her voice trailed off.

“I can feel that,” Toph said plainly. “I can feel the stone’s different, anyway.” She touched the spiraling vine-shape. “There are different kinds of earth. One of them is more here, and less over here.”

Luli’s fingers touched hers, and the jade. “This is dark green.” A fraction left. “This is lighter, shading to almost amber here. And over here is dark again - wait. Come over here.” She moved into the sun, and held a leafy stalk that smelled like mint still. “Feel the leaf. Where it’s warm, that’s sun; that’s a bright green. Where it’s cooler, that’s darker. Where you feel it dried - that’s brown.”

Toph traced her fingers over mint, remembering long hours spent in her family’s estate gardens. She knew what plants felt like. But what they looked like.... *You’re blind*, her mother would always say. And, *I’m sorry*.

No one had ever tried to show her something before. To let her see, the way they saw.

“So you can feel different kinds of earth inside stone?” Luli was almost bouncing in place as she held the mint. “Professor Tingzhe would love to trade notes with you. Tingzhe Wen; he’s an earthbending archaeologist at Ba Sing Se University? He’s Jinhai and Suyin’s father; I have them today because Meixiang’s mixed up in some kind of paperwork over Jia and Min’s classes, honestly I don’t know how they ever get things done over there, she must have explained the kids really didn’t know Bai a dozen times-”

“I’m not so sure that’d be a great idea,” Toph admitted. “I got here on my own, but I bet I’d pick up a Joo Dee if I tried to hit the university again.”

Luli’s heart speeded up. “You’re... visiting the city, then.”

Toph lowered her voice. “Yeah. Don’t think I’m being watched right now-”

“You are.” Almost a whisper. “Jinhai’s being watched.”

The kid? Why? “Are you in trouble? I could help-”

“I *live* with trouble.” Toph could hear Luli’s grin, despite her fear. “My husband’s in the City Guard.”

A massive yawn split the air from Luli’s apartment. “Do I hear somebody slandering my good name?”

“Just telling the truth,” Luli chuckled. “Toph likes the truth. Toph? This is my husband, Huojin.”

Solid footsteps onto gravel; the sway of a nod. “Pleasure to meet you, Miss Toph.”

And she could hear it again in his voice, like she had in Suyin’s and Jinhai’s. Like she’d heard in at least half the kids through the garden. “You’re-”

Toph bit her lip before she could say it. Huojin. *Fire metal*. The name was Earth Kingdom, but the meaning, and that accent....

You’re Fire Nation.

“You don’t sound like other people I’ve met in the city,” she said instead.

“My parents were refugees,” Huojin said matter-of-factly. “We came when I was six.” He shook his head. “Still shows, huh? Imagine that.”

And he was nervous, a little, but he wasn’t lying. Huh.

“Strange place to come for a visit on your own,” Huojin mused. “This city’s not a good place for a kid alone. I got lucky; Healer Amaya took me in after my parents were gone.” He shifted his weight, obviously eyeing her. “You do have people to go to, don’t you?”

“I’m *fine*,” Toph scowled. “I can look after myself.”

“Just asking. You looked worried, that’s all. And trust me, even in the Guard, it’s good to have people you can ask for backup.”

Toph smiled ruefully. “You sound like Uncle.” In more ways than one. “I’m okay. I just need to think about something.”

“Rocks?” Luli said wryly. “Or someone with a rock-hard head?”

“Hey!” Huojin protested. “I resemble that remark.”

Toph giggled.

“You’re as stubborn as the Wall, and we both know it,” Luli said affectionately. “So now that you’re up, sleepyhead... are you going out for tea before work? Or should I go pump Mushi for details?”

“You know,” Huojin said dubiously, “it’s actually possible for Lee to go a few days without a disaster.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“Who’s Lee?” Toph asked, curious.

“A walking disaster area,” Luli said brightly. “Poor kid!”

“Luli,” Huojin groaned.

“He’s a waterbender,” the carver went on. “Amaya’s apprentice. He’s really a nice young man....”

“But if trouble were lightning, somebody dumped that kid on a mountain top in a thunderstorm hog-monkey-tied in copper wire,” Huojin said ruefully. “So! Do I need to terrorize our little angels

into finishing their lessons, or have they taken after their mother and been responsible?"

"They're as responsible as you are, love."

"Oh spirits, not that. We're all doomed." A quick hug, and Huojin charged into the bushes. "Okay! Who's got their books in order?"

Toph listened to childish yells wistfully. She didn't mind being an only child. Honest. But sometimes....

"You know, if you get done thinking, and you do need help, we're right here," Luli offered. "That's what the Guard's for. And my husband's got one of the biggest hearts in it. And the hardest head," she chuckled. "But sometimes, that's just what you need."

Determination. Yeah, that was the Fire Nation all over. "You're right," Toph said thoughtfully. "Sometimes it is." Rising, she bowed politely. "Thanks. That really helped."

Accounts settled, Toph headed back toward the Upper Ring, scuffing her feet over stones as she thought about elements, and Long Feng, and being stuck in a city that felt more and more like a sitting target.

Aang's an airbender. He tries to skate around problems. He won't take Long Feng head-on. Katara, Sokka - they're water. He thinks up a plan, she comes at the bad guys sideways. Only Long Feng's already got the angles covered, so that won't work either. And me? I may be the greatest earthbender ever, but there's an awful lot of Dai Li.

We need to do what none of us really knows how to do. We need to attack.

...We need fire.

Uncle. Spirits, she'd give a lot to have Uncle here right now. Heck, she'd take Sparky; Zuko might be hair-trigger and cranky, but he sure as mountains knew how to go after something bigger and badder than he was. He'd snuck into the *North Pole*. The Earth King's palace couldn't be that much harder.

Keep dreaming, Toph. Uncle's the Dragon of the West, remember? The whole army's probably got pulverize on sight orders for him. No way is he in Ba Sing Se.

Too bad. Still. If Huojin was Fire Nation, and those other kids also sounded like his kids....

Maybe we can find some fire here after all.

Something to think about. After she pounded Aang into the ground with another lesson.

Another boring night, Shirong thought, perched in the shadow of a cistern atop a specific roof. Huddled a bit in his uniform, as an evening breeze blew off the lakes. Not that there's anything wrong with boring. Considering the alternative.

Not knowing where the spirit was, that was the problem. Everyone was jumpy. Search as they might, the kamui remained stubbornly out of sight. Though they had found *evidence* of the creature. Damn it.

It took imagination and unpleasant experience to recognize the fish-eaten lumps of flesh washed up on Lake Laogai's shores. For those with that experience... the tattered livers were both threat, and

raging incitement to break skulls.

This thing is eating people, Shirong thought darkly, fingering the whistle he had to summon reinforcements. *Right over our heads.*

There were a *lot* of angry Dai Li watching the lakeshore tonight.

Not that it has to come up there; not if it's going through the underground waterways, Shirong scowled. *Spirits, let it stay arrogant. Let it think it can keep taunting us. If it's learned to travel through artesian water, it could go anywhere-*

Earthen tiles trembled in his senses, as a familiar weight climbed the wall and crouched on the roof. "Are you keeping an eye on the neighborhood, or just me?"

Shirong eyed Lee, taken aback. "Ah, well...."

"Because if it's just me, Uncle and I are about to unroll the maps. And he made tea."

"Unroll the maps?" Shirong echoed, confused.

"You want to help pick out interesting spots or not?"

"Interesting how?" There was something decidedly askew about the world tonight. People just didn't walk up to Dai Li!

"Come on inside. Uncle thinks you might like trying a little ginseng in your oolong."

Bemused, Shirong followed Lee down.

And yes, Mushi's blend of tea *was* tasty.

Odd. So very odd. "How did you know I was there?" Recalling what had been up on the roof, Shirong added, "The cistern?"

"I'm not that good with water," Lee said dryly. "Somebody had to be out there. I just looked."

"I am a bit too old to be climbing onto roofs," Mushi smiled, unrolling a map of the world across the table.

Sure you are, Shirong thought sardonically. Granted, Mushi looked like he'd carried a bit more weight a few months back, but given what he'd seen from Lee? If the man wanted to be up on a roof, he'd be there.

So they hit a bad spot a few months back. I wonder what- Oh.

If Lee had seen the Avatar destroy the Fire Navy's invasion fleet - yes, two surviving colonials *would* have been in a bad spot. The only surprise would be that they'd lived to get out of it.

Details. I want details.

But he couldn't risk asking. If Lee didn't trust him enough to tell him about the Avatar - then Lee didn't trust him enough. Yet.

Keep your eyes open, and be patient.

Just being invited in was a step forward. If a slightly daunting one. How many people in Ba Sing

Se would willingly have a Dai Li in for tea?

It's kind of nice.

And it was an excellent opportunity to gauge the pair of them. You could tell a lot about people from what was in their apartment. And wasn't.

Bare in here, aside from Mushi's bonsai. I know they're not making a lot, but most people would spend a little on dressing up the place.

No wall hangings. No whimsical little lanterns or fine clothes in sight. But if those weren't two stocked travel packs tucked discreetly away in Lee's sleeping alcove, he'd eat his hat.

And the map. Not an expensive map; Shirong had seen bigger and fancier in noble houses of the Upper Ring. But from what he knew, it was an *accurate* map. Those weren't cheap.

Scraping by, and they've put their resources into being able to run again.

Meaning Lee wasn't paranoid. Something bad had happened to them... and they believed it could happen again.

Which led Shirong right back to the North Pole, and his unsuspecting city, and what in the world was he supposed to do if the haima-jiao latched onto the *Avatar*...?

Some of the notes on the map's transparent overlay finally sank in, and Shirong tried not to let his eyebrows climb. Little corrections, what ports needed dredging, whose forces had been sighted where and when.... "Have you been all these places?"

"Quite a few," Mushi said generously. Tapped Kyoshi Island's main bay. "The Unagi, here, might be a match for your lake's serpent. It feeds on young elephant koi... and the occasional unwary swimmer."

"I've always heard those people were crazy," Shirong muttered.

"Why?" Lee pounced. "Because they teach girls to fight?"

"Because they thought they could stay out of the war," Shirong said levelly. "Being out of the way only helps so long. And they don't have walls to protect them." *The North Pole did - no. Don't ask. Yet.* "So... what makes a spot *interesting*?"

"Ah." Mushi inclined his head. "That, is a matter of some debate." He touched a large island to the southeast. "The Eastern Air Temple."

For a moment, Shirong couldn't believe his ears. "You want to visit an Air Temple? No one can get up there!"

"Says the earthbender," Lee smirked. "You can. If you really want to." He flipped through a stack of handwritten notes. "I don't know. It's close, but you have to get through Chameleon Bay, and there's going to be fleets fighting there. If they aren't already. And it's east. People would have to come a long way."

"An argument against much of the east coast," Mushi observed. "I also recall that the forests are not such as we would find convenient, and the rainfall patterns are different from both here and the west. Which would be an unnecessary hindrance." His finger moved south and west, back onto the main continent. "Gaoling."

“Better spot,” Lee nodded, tracing the coast from Chameleon Bay west. “We’d still have to get through the bay, and it’s a longer trip the first time, but we’d only have to pass through these coastal waters once. It’s almost as far from strategic as you can get. That would help.” He frowned. “But it’s been quiet, so there are a lot of people there. Which could make it tricky.”

“Still, a possible spot,” Mushi noted. “Kyoshi Island.”

“Too small,” Lee stated. Eyed his uncle. “And I *think* they’d remember us.”

“Very possible,” Mushi acknowledged, a gleam of pure mischief in green eyes.

“It wasn’t my fault!”

Mushi raised a gray brow.

“I- but he- but they didn’t...” Words failed Lee, and he buried his head in his hands, groaning.

“What happened to you on Kyoshi Island?” Shirong asked warily.

“To me? Nothing.” Mushi smiled. “But my nephew happened to them. Let us say, both sides... disagreed.”

“And you’re still in one piece?” Shirong eyed Lee. “I’ve heard their warriors aren’t pushovers.”

“They’re not.” Lee lifted his head, still looking a bit sheepish. “They’re good.” He looked aside, thoughtful.

Mushi cleared his throat. “No.”

“But I could-”

“I do not think so.”

“But they’d be really-”

“Skilled as they are, they have made their stance in this war clear,” Mushi stated. “It would take extraordinary delicacy of manner to persuade them to even consider our plea, and when it comes to diplomacy....”

“Subtle, you’re not,” Shirong added dryly. Considered the locations they’d mentioned, and frowned. *They’re not just looking for someplace to visit. What are they looking for?*

“The Southern Air Temple,” Mushi suggested.

“*No.*” Lee shuddered.

“I agree,” Mushi admitted. Glanced at Shirong. “It was unpleasant to visit before, but now that we know you are vulnerable to some spirits... I do not know what Fire Lord Sozin’s commanders were thinking, to leave so many without funeral pyres. The risk of staying beyond nightfall would be far too great.”

Shirong studied the map anew, dredging up old history lessons. What little citizens were officially taught about the war focused on the Fire Nation’s attacks on the Earth Kingdom. *But it started here. In the Air Temples.* “It’s been a hundred years....”

“In some rooms, the bones still lie as thick as scythed wheat,” Mushi said gravely. “It is not

pleasant to consider you have kin among those who carried out such attacks.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Shirong watched Lee, trying to catch flickers of emotion on that scarred face. Anger, guilt, sorrow... determination.

He thinks what the Fire Nation did is wrong. And he wants to do something about it.

What, exactly, Lee thought he might *do*, Shirong had no idea. Lee was just a teenager.

Then again, the Avatar's barely more than a child. These two got into Ba Sing Se. Whatever they're planning, I wouldn't want to bet against them. “I’m still trying to grasp what you consider interesting.”

Mushi’s smile held amusement, and challenge. “The Western Air Temple.”

“Upside-down would take some getting used to,” Lee reflected. “It’s well placed, but I’m not sure we want to be somewhere you can rappel down into. But maybe.” He touched the map. “We’d be going west through the lakes. That might be safer.”

“And that route leads to other possibilities,” Mushi acknowledged. “Taku.”

“Pohuai Stronghold,” Lee countered.

“Yes... though I believe someone illustrated that was not the most secure of fortresses,” Mushi chuckled.

Shirong stared. Mushi smiled back. And Lee tried to look anywhere else.

He broke into Pohuai Stronghold?

And he was still alive to tell about it. Unbelievable. “Mushi,” Shirong asked bluntly, “what have you been teaching this boy?”

“Everything he would learn,” Mushi said with great satisfaction. “Though some of the credit is not mine. The arts of stealth were never my specialty.”

Lee, Shirong noted wryly, was blushing. “You knew?” the waterbender muttered.

“I lost no little sleep worrying,” Mushi answered quietly. “But I knew you would not have attempted it if you were not certain you *could*.” He regarded Lee with quiet pride. “I rely on you to do what you believe is right. And I trust that you will do so with care, and proper planning.”

Compliment and gentle rebuke in one, Shirong judged, seeing Lee’s ears go red. On the one hand, he was tempted to tell Mushi to ease up; the boy was only sixteen. On the other....

If he's taking Pohuai Stronghold level risks, I'm amazed Mushi hasn't locked him in a room to calm down.

No wonder Mushi wanted Lee working himself into the ground. Spirits only knew what kind of trouble he’d find if he didn’t.

“So... next was Gaipan?” Lee managed.

“Fire Nation territory, for the last several years,” Shirong pointed out.

“And apparently prone to floods,” Mushi mused. “An upland near there might have promise,

but....” He shrugged, and let his finger trace around the mountainous coast, almost to the very northernmost tip of the continent. “And then, there is here.”

“Chilly,” Shirong observed dryly. *You got clear of the North Pole once. Why would you come that close again? Even if there is a stretch of ocean between.*

“Not as much as you think,” Lee said seriously. “It snows up there, and the winter nights are dark... but high as it is, the mountain tops are *warm*.” He frowned, and nodded. “At least as warm as Ba Sing Se.”

Shirong glanced at Mushi, startled. “How is that possible?”

“Fortuitous currents of air, it would seem,” the older man informed him. “Though I also suspect this mountain, here, may be volcanic.” He tapped the map just slightly west. “The natural gas underneath the range can be a hazard if one delves too deep in the earth... but that itself could be an asset, properly applied.”

“Not the Temple.” Lee smiled wryly. “Next door.”

“It was cultivated once, and could be again,” Mushi agreed. “Yet it would be far enough from the current occupants to not impose.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Shirong held up halting hands. “Temple? There’s an *Air Temple* in the Earth Kingdom? And it’s inhabited? The Fire Nation-”

“Left no survivors,” Mushi cut him off. “Those who dwell there today, are from a village destroyed a decade past by flood. They are of earth. Though living that high has made them... a bit odd.”

“Crazy as an airbender,” Lee muttered. “I’m keeping my feet on the ground.”

“Likely wise,” Mushi chuckled.

Shirong looked at the map. And them. And Lee’s extensive, exhaustive notes. And sat back, stunned. “You’re not planning a visit.”

“Agent Shirong,” Mushi said, quiet and serious. “As a guardian of this city... what would happen if Ba Sing Se fell?”

Shirong felt chill. “It won’t.”

Mushi inclined his head. “But if it did?”

“We’ll fight to the last man standing. You *know* that.” Shirong half-rose from his chair, angry. “If you know something-”

“It’s not like that!” Lee was on his feet, hands out and empty between them. “It’s *not*. Just - Shirong, *listen*.” His voice dropped. “You don’t know what’s out there.”

“Or more accurately, who,” Mushi said gravely. “For the first time since the Siege of Ba Sing Se, a descendant of Sozin’s line has taken to the battlefield in war.”

Shirong swallowed hard. Sank back into his chair, legs suddenly nerveless. “I thought - rumor said the crown prince was exiled....”

“Prince Zuko was, indeed,” Mushi said levelly. “Princess Azula was not.”

Slow breaths, Shirong told himself, trying to keep the world from graying out. One of the royal family on the battlefield. The last time *that* had happened....

Keep it together. You've got to tell Quan. "If she's the younger heir, she can't be more than a child."

"Don't," Lee said harshly. "Don't *ever* make that mistake. It'll be the last one you make."

"She is fourteen, true," Mushi said, equally grim. "But she is a firebending prodigy, and a tactical genius. I believe even the Dragon of the West would pause, if he faced her on the field." He swept a hand over the map. "So. I ask you, as guardian of your city and a loyal citizen of the Earth Kingdom. What hope do your people have, if Ba Sing Se falls?"

"I hope it doesn't," Lee said quietly. "I hope you can stand her off. But if things go wrong... and damn it, around me things *always* go wrong... Shirong, if she takes you, you're Earth Kingdom. You're just dead. If she gets *us*...."

"I see." And he did. Horribly enough.

They're afraid. These two aren't even afraid of Dai Li - and they're afraid.

"You're going to run," Shirong said bleakly. "Again."

"I'm *not* running," Lee said grimly. "I'm *tired* of running." He took a breath. "But sometimes you have to make a strategic retreat."

Call it what you want. They were planning to run. Why had he expected any better? Spies didn't stand and fight-

Wait, Shirong told himself, through the haze of outrage and disappointment. *Think. What are they looking at? Resources, rain, how cold it is, how many people are there, how to get past those fighting the war....* "What do you mean by hope?"

Mushi saw the dawning wonder in his face, and smiled. "The only hope that matters. The hope to live, to fight another day."

"...You're planning a resistance outpost." It was incredible. Impossible. They were *refugees*. Fire Nation colonials, no less. They had no money, no resources, no authority-

And none of that would make a difference, if Ba Sing Se fell, Shirong realized. *It'd be chaos, panic; blood in the streets. If they meant to get people out - all they'd have to know is where to find supplies to commandeer, how to talk people into seizing them, and how to get people to listen to them long enough to evacuate.*

Like he was listening, right now.

Lee's been all over the city working with Amaya. He's found allies in the university, the Guard - even the palace. He knows how to find us. And who knows what contacts Mushi's made in that teashop.

Spirits... I think they could do this.

Try, at least. Succeed? It still seemed unreal.

"I guess it might work for that," Lee said, after sharing a glance with his uncle. "But that wasn't

exactly... the Fire Nation's not going to destroy Ba Sing Se. It's too big. Too valuable. Unless she's having a really bad day...." He took a breath. "What we're looking at is, if that happens, some people shouldn't *be* here. Me. Uncle. Professor Tingzhe and his family; anybody who knows something about the catacombs under the city. Healer Amaya. And anyone else we can get out who'd poke a hole into any plans to hold the city." He hesitated, and looked Shirong straight in the eye. "Your families."

Shirong smiled wryly, the offer bittersweet. *Would that I had one.*

But it was a valid point. If Ba Sing Se ever fell - it wouldn't do at all, to have Dai Li families in enemy hands. "I still think it's impossible."

"That may be," Mushi acknowledged. "But we would rather prepare for a disaster that will never come, than be cast adrift in the typhoon." He gestured to the map. "So what do you think we should consider?"

It was impossible. It should have seemed ridiculous.

But if there was one thing he'd learned studying Lee, it was that despite his masquerade as an Earth Kingdom refugee, the young waterbender didn't have a deceptive bone in his body.

And here were two people with a map, who'd been places he'd never see.

"...Tell me about the Air Temples."

Hours later, Shirong was back on a rooftop. Thinking.

Learn your enemy's nature, and half the battle is won.

Not that the Avatar was his enemy. Spirits, no. But a threat to Ba Sing Se - yes. That he might very well be.

And while Lee hadn't breathed one word about the Avatar, he'd been almost talkative when it came to the Temples. The sorrow of the Southern, the peacefulness of the Eastern, the head-hurting upside-down architecture of the Western.

"How does it even stay standing?" Shirong had asked, disbelieving.

"No clue," Lee had muttered, shaking his head as if to blot out memory. "Maybe they found a bunch of insane earthbenders to hook it into the cliff top."

"And paid with many barrels of cactus juice," Mushi had added wryly.

Though when it came to the Northern, Lee had been a lot more picky with his details. Shirong couldn't blame him. Mention in the colonies that you'd seen anyone gliding, and you'd probably find yourself being wrung dry by Fire Nation interrogators, all the while knowing you were responsible for unleashing rabid firebenders on innocent people.

They've literally been around the world. How? Why?

It'd make sense, if they'd been spying for the Fire Nation. But if that were the case, there shouldn't *be* a Northern Air Temple anymore. On the other hand, if they hadn't visited there until after Mushi had decided his nephew's injury merited an unannounced retirement - why go there?

North, a lot of ocean, and difficult terrain, Shirong reflected. Not a bad place to break your trail if

you were worried about Fire Nation pursuit.

Which seemed to fit what he'd seen of them. Lee tried to hide it, but the healer moved like he was expecting an ambush. Always.

But that doesn't make sense. If no one knew he was a waterbender, why chase them? They're just two colonials.

Or were they? Mushi seemed to know things about everywhere in the *world*. What else was hidden behind wise eyes?

Questions upon questions. Though if they'd been enough places to see the war's horrors firsthand.... Well, it explained why Lee was as determined to learn healing as he must have been to learn swords. There was nothing worse than having someone die on you and knowing you could have done *something*. If only you'd known how.

Healer or not, Lee was still a fighter, none too subtly prying for details on the haima-jiao whenever they'd paused to brainstorm. Given it was the young man's neck on the line, Shirong had obliged. Though he'd left out exactly how angry his fellow Dai Li were. An agent was always cool, calm, and inhuman. Ask anyone.

"Lake Laogai," Mushi had mused. "If it is lairing there, and not in truly sunless waters below the earth - either there is more salt in the lake, or there are other reasons such a creature is more... comfortable."

Lee had looked alarmed. "Did something happen there?"

"I'll look into it," Shirong had answered. And knew no one was fooled.

Bad, yes. Something that would upset the spirits more than usual? Difficult to say. They'd been mindbending Joo Dees and troublemakers for *decades*. Imprisoning or executing those the Grand Secretariat deemed necessary, shaping Ba Sing Se as it must be; why should the spirits decide now was any worse than times past?

Before, we didn't have the Avatar's bison.

He'd attended more than a few of Tingzhe's lectures on Chin the Conqueror, trying to gage if the professor were alluding to the current war in ways that might be too dangerous. What the man had said about Chin, Kyoshi, and badger-moles had made him interested enough to look up the Dai Li's own records of Avatars. Which implied the bison... might not be just a bison.

Avatars have animal guides. Kyoshi didn't meet hers until after she defeated Chin, but... she had a badger-mole. Roku had a dragon.

The Avatar was being kept from his bison. The spirits might be very upset, indeed.

Enough to unleash a man-eater on our city? Our people are innocent!

But the Dai Li served the people. And the Dai Li were *not*.

Oma and Shu. That can't be it. Long Feng wouldn't order the bison kept if it put our people at risk. He wouldn't!

When had he stopped being sure?

Mind on the job, Shirong told himself grimly, looking about in the night. First, keep the water-kamuiy from grabbing any more waterbenders. Second, find the damned thing and arrange for a spirit-roast. Third, work on his recruits.

At least that last seemed to be going well. Once they'd talked out the map, Lee had shyly shown him one of the latest scroll's moves; a flex of fingers that turned water into lethal claws of ice. Useful in and of itself; deadly daggers were no small asset, and when those claws could be *thrown* - yes, a Dai Li knew how handy that could be.

But Lee had surprised him yet again.

"How do the gloves work?"

From anyone else, Shirong would have laughed. A waterbender whose first training had been in firebending forms, and he thought he could figure out how to shape ice like rock?

But he'd never seen a waterbender create a move like Lee had. A net strong enough to drag a malicious kamuiy off its prey; to *trap* it, even if only for a minute.

It couldn't hurt to try.

Well, now we know many ways it won't work, Shirong thought wryly. *I'm sure he'll be at it again tomorrow. And again, and again, until he gets something to work.*

From a purely practical point of view, that was useful in itself. A waterbender practicing might draw their prey into the open.

I hope he survives.

He'd hate to lose any recruit. Lee more than most. The young man had talent, drive, the pure will needed not to give up....

And they had me in for tea, Shirong admitted, recalling the warmth, the friendly looks, their honest respect for his opinion. *I could get used to that-*

Oh. Oh, spirits.

Rueful admiration in his gaze, Shirong eyed a dark window below. *Mushi, you are a sly, conniving, wonderful old man.*

A lost pygmy puma, abandoned to live by its wits. That's how he'd thought of Lee, that first day with the bear. An impression that had only strengthened with the first waterbending scroll, and how fast the young healer had blossomed under Amaya's teaching.

But if that were true of Lee, how much more was it true of himself?

I'm not alone. I trust my friends. And I can always take the uniform off, and....

There. That was the sticking point. If he wanted something beyond the Dai Li, he had to hide what he was. *Who* he was.

With those two, he didn't have to hide anything.

I think someone just tried to recruit me.

Well, well, well.

That man, Shirong thought wryly, *has the guts of a first-class cat burglar*.

And was it wrong for him to feel delighted, instead of offended? Puzzles, the pair of them; an intricate web of honest mysteries Mushi had all but *invited* him to unravel.

Let's play. Shirong smiled, plotting out exactly what he'd search for once his shift was over.
Pohuai Stronghold, hmm?

He could hardly wait.

Chapter End Notes

Written in part because, given what we know Sozin and Iroh did in canon (and I'd bet Azulon was no slouch), the reaction of any sane person to somebody out of that family taking the field should *not* be the Gaang's, "oh, look, crazy ladies with blue fire". More like, "Aaauugh! Sephiroth! Run away! *Run away!*"

Chapter 17

Too early for big sisters, Suyin thought grumpily, eyes half-open as she tried to work around the giggling girl at the wash basin.

“Paddle my canoe!” Jia chortled. “Oh, the look on Madame Macmu-Ling’s *face*....”

Poetry class. Argh. Suyin got her face washed, stuck out her tongue behind her sister’s back, and headed downstairs.

“I saw that!”

“So?” Suyin smirked, jumping off the last step with a flourish. To land in front of her mother’s raised eyebrow. “Er... Mom?”

“Ooo, now you’re gonna get it,” Jia said gleefully, gracefully gliding down the stairs like a *proper* young lady.

“Suyin, be polite to your sister,” Meixiang said firmly. Raised her gaze, and eyed Jia. “Jia, stop hogging the washroom in the morning, or you’re going to have to start cutting your dates an hour shorter.”

“But, Mom-!”

“If you can’t get out of the way fast enough in the morning, you obviously need more sleep. Or am I wrong?” She shooed them both toward breakfast. “Eat, eat; you don’t want to be late.”

Tea, Suyin thought gratefully, gulping it down before she attacked her morning rice. Chewed her way through half of it, trying to ignore the sullen steaming beside her. Jia’d deserved that, she’d been out late a *lot*-

But some of those times, she was out late when she would have been early. Only she was helping me with Jinhai. Suyin braced herself, and glanced at her sister. “So... something neat happened at poetry?”

I am so going to regret this. Somebody probably scored something esoteric about stars and spring mists off somebody else in the linked verse competition, and I’m going to be so bored....

“You’ll never believe it!” Jia perked up, smiling. “A Water Tribe boy crashed the class!” She giggled. “And I mean *crashed*. He fell in wearing half the window!”

Suyin’s jaw dropped. “Really?”

Okay. For once? Making nice with her sister wasn’t so bad.

Jia launched into salacious details, including way too many about what Water Tribe tunics didn’t cover, and it was almost enough to make Suyin forget they were being watched. And why.

Something that eats waterbenders. Suyin tried not to shudder. At least her little brother was actually safe.

But Lee’s not.

For once, she hoped the Dai Li won. No matter what it took.

There came a point in time, Smellerbee realized, shivering, where you were just too scared to scream. Even if there hadn't been rock wrapped around her mouth as a gag.

The Dai Li were so *quiet*.

A few carried crystals that glowed soft green; just enough light to ease their passage through endless tunnels. Only an ingrained habit of defiance kept Smellerbee struggling against her bonds; even if she broke free, even if she by some miracle got Longshot and Jet loose too - where would they go?

Yell at us. Hit us. Look at us. Do something!

The Dai Li weren't even touching them. Just moving at a fast walk, the three bound freedom fighters carried on a rolling wave of stone.

I feel so dumb. Smellerbee squirmed again, useless or not. *That Guard warned us. Amaya and Mushi, they told us Jet was asking for trouble. We were trying to talk him out of it! If it weren't for that - that thing....*

She thought they'd gotten away from it in the alley. And two of them had. But Jet....

Part of Jet just wasn't home anymore. He kept seeing shadows where there weren't any, listening for a voice neither of them could hear. And at night - at night, he kept trying to get to water.

After she and Longshot had dragged him out of a well, she decided this was a bad idea. That all of Ba Sing Se was a bad idea, and she'd rather take her chances with the whole Fire Nation army camped outside the walls than stick around here anymore.

She'd told Longshot that. He'd nodded once, eyes sober. And they'd tried to get Jet and themselves to the Outer Wall and *out*.

They hadn't made it.

Now, a pair of Dai Li parted stone like a curtain, and they were lifted into an ordinary room carved into rock, with real lanterns burning on a table by a pitcher of water.

One of the Dai Li did glance at them then, just for a moment. Barely interested; like they were a particularly stubborn boulder that hadn't yet split.

Turned away, and disappeared up stone stairs.

Look at us! We're here! We're right here!

Who knew how long later, footsteps came back down. And not alone. "Was it wise to send him away?" the Dai Li said neutrally.

"The sun is still up," Amaya observed, stepping into the light to regard them with sorrow, and grim determination. "He'll be safe enough with his uncle to look after him. And he may have done some hard things in the past, but this... even to protect those he loves, I would rather not ask this of him."

Which was when Smellerbee stopped being scared, and started being terrified.

Never tick off a healer, her older brother had told her once; back when she'd still had an older brother. *They know how to mess you up.*

“You usually don’t need my help to question prisoners, Agent Yunxu,” Amaya went on, still with that same chilling sorrow.

“Time is critical,” the sleepy-eyed Dai Li said plainly. “And the one most affected,” he nodded, ever so slightly at Jet, “isn’t behaving... rationally.”

“So you want me to heal him enough to talk.” She sighed. Looked over them all, and inclined her head. “I am sorry. But what they’re after will kill those I care for, if it is not stopped.”

No, no, Smellerbee thought, frozen. *Get away....*

“The water-spirit almost took Lee’s mind and spirit,” Amaya went on quietly, advancing on Jet. “It *will* try again. And I will not let that happen. No matter what it takes.”

“The Fire Nation took our homes! The Fire Nation took our families!” Jet had said that, raid after deadly raid. *“We have to fight them wherever they are, whoever they are! No matter what it takes!”*

Facing it from the other side, Smellerbee was very, very sorry.

“Nothing,” Yunxu frowned.

“Nothing?” Amaya arched a brow, still queasy. Though she’d be damned if she’d let this man know it. Shirong, she might have; a faint light of compassion, of regret, still burned in the man, like stars seen through mist. She couldn’t fault Zuko for being drawn to him. Like called to like, and she knew what wounds Shirong had suffered.

Yunxu... the light was gone. If it had ever existed.

“Nothing we didn’t know.” Yunxu let his gaze linger on the re-gagged children. “We’ll take them now.”

“Why not just let them go?” Amaya said levelly, glancing at the terrified girl out of the corner of her eye. “They were trying to get out of the city. Surely, that would be best for everyone.”

Faint hope lit Smellerbee’s eyes. Longshot held himself still-

“And what if it decides to follow a victim that got away?” Yunxu said dispassionately. “A waterbender is a more attractive target, but we can’t take the chance.”

“Then you could just hold them until the spirit is dealt with,” Amaya suggested.

Yunxu looked at her, and silently looked away.

You can’t save everyone, Amaya told herself, heartsick. *People are dying*. “I think I could use some air.”

Somehow she wasn’t surprised that Yunxu followed her out to the garden. He didn’t trust her. Hadn’t for years. She was too valuable to drag under Lake Laogai without proof... but Yunxu was sure she was up to something.

Which, of course, she was.

I wish I were up to a bit more, Amaya thought, sitting by her pond to watch flashes of gold, crimson, and blue molly-guppies, flickering through light cast by one of Zuko’s lanterns.

Thoughtful, careful young man; he'd hedged iron and glass in with stones to be sure none would trip over, and refilled all the oil reservoirs before he left-

The pond rippled as if blown by wind, a thin sheet of water lapping over the edge. Upwards.

Lantern-light hissed out.

Have to get back, get away-

“Amaya....”

Blue robes trimmed with white fur, her mother held out a damp hand. And... there was something wrong about that. But she'd been so lonely, so long, and she'd done so many awful things to try and save those she could from the war....

“I forgive you,” whispered a voice of waves and water-weeds.

Yunxu never had a chance to scream.

Shirong stared at a Fire Nation wanted poster, and didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Pohuai Stronghold, indeed.

The Army always kept the best intelligence for themselves, but a fair amount did eventually end up where a Dai Li could get to it. You had to know what rumors you might need to squash, after all. And which groups of refugees would be the most trouble.

As for the intelligence available on the stronghold and Taku.... Given the last herbalist hanging on up there had a habit of talking to her cat, anyone might be forgiven for thinking her tale of advising the Avatar to look for frozen frogs was - well. But when you put that together with reports of localized whirlwinds, Yu Yan mobilization under a recently-promoted Admiral Zhao, and the absolute chaos that had apparently broken out in the stronghold that night....

Plus, the wanted poster. One simply could not ignore the wanted poster. Fierce-tusked blue theater mask and all.

Spirits, no wonder Lee's paranoid. That's no small string of cash on his head.

And put together, the reports explained much more. That crushing sorrow and guilt, like a blanket of stones. The fierce determination to learn healing from Amaya *first*, when Lee was a fighter through and through....

He freed the Avatar. And how did the boy repay him? By slaughtering untold thousands of his countrymen.

Exact numbers were hard to come by, but reliable accounts placed the invasion fleet at *hundreds* of ships. Many of classes that would carry a hundred, even a thousand men. Wrapping his mind around the potential casualty count alone made Shirong shiver.

Even if Lee had abandoned the Fire Nation, the boy had a heart fierce as any waterbender's. Every death must have cut like a knife.

And he's probably convinced himself it's all his fault, Shirong thought bleakly. No wonder he doesn't want to trust anyone.

After all, legends said the Avatar was the defender of the world. If you couldn't trust him to do the right thing, who could you trust?

Except the Avatar doesn't defend your world. Not if you're Fire Nation.

Or so one Fire Nation petitioner had claimed, centuries ago, crying for justice against Kyoshi before the Earth King himself.

What was her name? Tama? Temun? Something odd....

He'd tracked down as much as he could of the original record, hungry to know if there was actually a *reason* behind a century of war against his people-

Temul. That was her name. A firebender.

A very odd firebender, from what he could cudgel out of memory. Who'd sworn the Avatar had wronged her people, bitterly, and that all the world would suffer for it.

The darkest day in Fire Nation history. I wish I knew what happened.

Professor Tingzhe Wen would know, probably. But speak face to face with a man he might one day have to disappear? No. Not if Shirong could avoid it.

Besides. I already know what I need to. The Avatar isn't always fair. Temul didn't even get a hearing.

And that was Kyoshi. A grown woman who knew that justice required consideration, as well as decisiveness, and that nothing in life was either fully good or evil.

This Avatar is twelve years old. And the people he trusts are barely older. Shirong shook his head. *I don't like it.*

I want him out of my city.

The agent sat up straight in his chair, the ramifications of that thought sinking in. The generals surely had a plan for the Avatar's power. Long Feng must have a plan, or he wouldn't order the bison confined-

But if the Avatar had his bison, he wouldn't have to be here. They could still plan. He could visit. Why keep the animal from him?

Shirong couldn't think of any good reason. But he could think of *a* reason. A horrible one.

Back the Avatar into a corner. Trap him, so you can aim that power at your enemies.

Like he was trapped at the North Pole.

No!

Hands clenched on paper, crinkling it; Shirong made himself let go, glad he never used his rock gloves to read. He could imagine the walls of this archive studded with stone from that sudden, soul-deep fury.

I am Dai Li. I've done horrible things to protect my city. I'll probably do a lot more. But this....

I am Dai Li, of the order formed to protect Ba Sing Se from its own spirits. By Avatar Kyoshi

herself. And this horrible thing, I will not do.

Shirong had to take a moment just to breathe, shaken. He'd be out of step with his comrades. He'd be potentially disobeying Long Feng....

I don't know what effect that horror at the North Pole had on the spirits, and I don't want to find out here. Ba Sing Se doesn't deserve that. My people don't deserve that. Lee sure as hell doesn't deserve that.

And a twelve-year-old boy who happened to be the Avatar didn't deserve it either. Shirong had read reports on the Ba Sing Se Zoo incident. For all his awesome power, the Avatar was a child. An impulsive, happy, optimistic *child*.

It's wrong. If I'm right... what they're planning to do is just wrong.

Not to mention lethally short-sighted. Eventually that boy would grow up, and have all the power legend said Kyoshi and Roku had wielded. Did the Earth Kingdom really want someone that powerful knowing they'd been used as a weapon?

No. Oma and Shu, no.

I have to do something.

Do something? Do *what*? Go against Long Feng's direct orders? Not to mention the purely practical aspect of the number of fellow Dai Li who'd be between him and any attempt to free the bison. He was a reasonably skilled earthbender and agent. He was *not* the Blind Bandit.

I need help.

Almost against his will, Shirong glanced at the poster again.

There's a big difference between a fortress on a cliff and a labyrinth underground.

Still. Pohuai Stronghold. Who in the Army had ever broken in there?

He's fast, smart, and sneaky. He may have less than a month training his waterbending, but those moves he does know, he has cold. And he has years of training in firebending forms.

Most important of all... no one would see it coming.

Valid points, Shirong thought. But will he do it? He has no reason to love the Avatar.

But Lee did love his uncle. And cared about Amaya. Not to mention the numerous other people he'd apparently gotten mixed up with. The young man *cared*.

And he's practical. Even if he hates the Avatar, and I couldn't blame him if he did... he'll do what he believes is right.

Still. If Lee agreed, and that was an *if*, he'd need an earthbender's help to get in-

Running feet; Shirong had just enough time to stuff the poster out of sight before Quan hit the doorframe hard enough to shiver rocks.

"Our agents at the clinic missed their check-in," Quan said grimly.

Amaya.

“Perhaps we should just go home, nephew,” Iroh suggested, as they climbed the steps to Amaya’s clinic. “If she believed it was better for you not to be here....”

“She was going to do something she didn’t *want* to do, Uncle.” Zuko’s face was grim. “I’ve seen that before.”

And what that might be, Iroh feared to know. Especially if the Dai Li were involved. “Even so,” he said gravely, “she may not be pleased if we interfere.”

“I’m - not planning to interfere,” Zuko admitted quietly. “If she feels she *has* to - I know what that’s like.” He glanced at his uncle. “But I thought, if it’s over... we could be there. If she needs somebody.”

Iroh raised gray brows, and nodded. “That is very thoughtful, nephew. But let us be polite, as well. If she tells us she wishes us to go, we will-” He cut himself off, as Zuko held up a warning hand.

“What do you hear?” Zuko asked, half a whisper.

Focused, Iroh listened. People in the streets, shopkeepers calling their wares before closing for the night, the outraged squawks of an ostrich-horse a street away....

From the clinic, nothing.

The pair traded glances, and his nephew went through the door fast and hard.

Silence.

Iroh shut the door quietly behind them, and lit a flame in his palm for more light. “Only one lamp lit,” he observed, as they passed through the entryway into the main clinic. “It could not have happened too long after dark....”

The smell reached them then, and Iroh saw his nephew pale.

Seaweed. And blood. “Call a fire.”

“Uncle-”

“We will make explanations later,” Iroh said darkly. “If there is anyone still alive to explain to.”

There wasn’t.

One agent lay lifeless in a cold red pool just inside the screen to Amaya’s garden, throat ravaged as if by the Unagi’s teeth. Another had fallen face-first in the pool, drowned and gone when they turned him over. A third was all but entombed in ice against the wall where he’d tried to flee, hands raised before his face in futile defense-

Not futile, Iroh realized, as they came closer and Zuko swore under his breath. “He kept an airspace open. Quickly!”

Fire in their hands, breathing steam, they cracked the agent free. He fell as dead weight into their arms, pale as ice....

But Iroh had studied waterbenders, and taught his nephew well. A cold body might only *seem* dead.

Ear by the Dai Li's mouth, Iroh felt the faintest whisper of a breath. "Bring him inside. Build up the fire!"

Hot rocks wrapped in blankets around the man, they propped him by the stove and kept working. Heating water on top of the stove, Zuko wreathed his hands in flame and worked over icy skin. Iroh timed faint breaths, and blew out gentle steam so the agent could breathe in warmth as well.

"Bon," Zuko kept saying as he worked, "Bon, it's Lee. You're at the clinic. We found you. You're going to be all right, just hang on...."

Finally, the agent began to shiver.

Iroh glanced at his nephew, who nodded and released the fire back to the stove, wrapping his hands in hot water instead. "Agent Bon?" Iroh asked. "Can you hear us?"

"Father?" Bon whispered, teeth chattering. "No... can't be... you're dead...."

"Bon!" Zuko said sharply. "It's gone. I can't feel it anywhere. It's gone, and people are dead, and Amaya- Wake up!"

Bon's eyes snapped open. "...Lee?"

Iroh arched an eyebrow, intrigued. Earthbenders didn't usually respond to a firebender's force of will. "We have not found Healer Amaya."

"It took her. Through the water...."

As he'd feared. "Stay with him, while I get help," Iroh directed, rising.

"Not staying here," Bon gasped, trying to sit up before Zuko shoved him back down. "It killed Dai Li, can't let it get away-!"

"*Stay. Down.*" An order, that crackled in the air as Zuko glared the agent into going limp. "You did your duty. You told us what we're up against. Now stay put, so Uncle can get help to keep you alive while we go *kill* this thing."

"Kill it?" Bon managed through shivers. "But - you're a waterbender...."

"I am." Zuko's gaze went to the lanterns. "Which is why it's never going to see this coming."

One remains who would challenge us.

Curled in endless cold, Amaya tried not to think. But the water and the power and the hunger were all, and she couldn't help but see green eyes under black hair; green that burned to gold....

That one. Hunger, and a chill contempt. Thief. Disrupter. Prey. Yes, we know him....

Thief? Zuko had never-

And she was breathing in storm, she *was* the storm, fixed on the fires of mortal lives on the frail metal vessel. Born of fire; born enemies. Too dangerous to approach in calmer seas; too dangerous to lure, almost always. Which would make their despair all the sweeter. She felt the lightning building... *strike!*

No!

Fire-in-flesh had seized the lightning; parried it, away and into the waves. The life dangling so temptingly from twisted metal was grabbed by other lives, hauled away from danger. Unfair, unfair; it hungered, they could not deny it....

But the storm was still strong, the metal hull damaged. The fire-lives would fall. They *would*. Curses breathed around the mortals, two above all, and Agni had no power here. And no other spirit would deny its feasting. The mortals' own hate and obsession would *make* them prey-

"Let him go. We need to get this ship to safety."

Impossible! That blood could not ignore its curse. It existed; that alone disrupted what-should-be. It could not deny destiny. It would fall, and be destroyed.

Yet the mortals gained the sunlight at the heart of the storm, and it was powerless.

You cannot rob me of my prey!

But they had. For a time. As another bright fire had, years ago and far away; gold and green and violet burning between water and delectable flesh. It could taste the sand of that warm-water shore, even now.

But that fire-life was well defended, and these more recent thieves had headed north, into waters too chill for comfort. And the hunger would not be sated by anything as petty as *waiting*. Death and disruption called; and here, the feeding had been good.

There was still need for caution, of course. The Bridge was near, and it was always wise to avoid such great power, no matter how young. The Bridge might not understand what belonged to it by right.

And anything it could take, belonged to it.

As you do. A susurrus of waves. *He is the last? And he is coming to us.*

Twice he escaped. Fire-born. Enemy. Thief. Once by fire. Once by sun.

The sun will not scorch again for hours. And as for fire....

Water crushed her, and she had no strength to weep.

Think, Zuko told himself. *Don't jump in. Don't panic. Think.* He tugged the reins of his hastily-borrowed ostrich-horse to aim for a distant stretch of sandy lakeshore between water and towering cliffs. Uncle was matching him pace for pace, still *tching* a bit about their mounts' hapless owner, who had not fully appreciated the seriousness of their request.

The nerve jabs would wear off. Eventually.

"The plan is clear?" Iroh called to him.

"Yes!" *I hope.* "Just tell me why this monster isn't going to do the smart thing, hide on the bottom of the lake, and *laugh* at us."

"Three reasons!" The retired general sounded grimly cheerful. "First, if it did that, we would have no chance to rescue Amaya. And that would simply not be fair."

"This isn't a spirit-tale, Uncle!" *The hero doesn't always win. As if we were ever heroes.*

“Is it not?”

“*Better* reason!”

“Young people.... Second - this *is* a kamuiy, not one of the great spirits. It is surely hungry, and cunning. But I would imagine it is not too bright.”

Okay, he could work with that. Though dumb opponents could be some of the most dangerous. You never knew what the idiots would do. “And third?”

“Well, I am certain that is more than enough....”

“Uncle!” Zuko cast him a brief glare. “We’re risking our lives. We might be risking the whole city! I need to know!”

Iroh gave him a look askance. “Nephew. I have great confidence in your ability to irritate *anything*.”

...Okay, maybe he *didn’t* need to know.

Oh hell, it’s a talent. Use it. Which was what their plan meant to do-

His mount shied, as earth erupted. “Stop right there!” an unfamiliar voice ordered.

Dai Li. Wonderful. Zuko halted his mount, searching under night-shadowed hats for any hint of a familiar face. “Agent Shirong! Amaya’s in the lake!”

“You’re sure of that, are you?” Shirong’s stance was subtle, outwardly relaxed, and unmistakable.

He thinks it got me again. Damn it, we don’t have time-!

“We are not,” Iroh stated, voice carrying through the night. “Agent Bon said it took her, and her body was not at the clinic. We hope she is there. And that it has not yet fed.”

“Bon?” the agent apparently in charge echoed darkly.

“Probably feels like he went for a swim at the North Pole, but he was lucid,” Zuko bit out, staring at calm, dark waters. “We left him with the Guard-”

Oh no.

“Down!”

A *push* froze the leading edge of the wave as it roared overhead, held back the bulk of the water long enough for everyone to bolt clear. But even that light touch of bending swamped him, cold and hunger and death pulling him under....

No.

I am Prince Zuko. Son of Ursa, and Fire Lord Ozai.

I’ve faced fire, and betrayal, and the Avatar himself.

Exile didn’t kill me. The North Pole didn’t kill me. Azula didn’t kill me.

One of us is going to die here. It’s not going to be me!

Night snapped back into focus, and Zuko bared his teeth at towering wet shadows. Pulled up a ball of water between his hands, flattening it between circling palms until it steamed with glints of green and gold. Swirled it into a globe again, and lashed *out-*

He lost the sphere as soon as it hit shadow-water, with a wrench like someone tearing away a fingernail. But that was fine. Better than fine. Because fire-laced water made it *scream*, and in the brief moment shadows cleared at the impact-

Amaya.

Suspended in water, limp; eyes open and aglow like nothing the Dai Li had ever seen before. He could tell that from the gasps, the scrambling huddle of *fear* behind him.

But I've seen it before. And I don't care.

Zuko smirked, and knew Shirong thought he was crazy. "Was that supposed to scare me?" he taunted surging black water. "You'll have to do better than that!"

Shadow-water roared, swirling into a scaled dragon-horse whose head lunged for him, fangs leading.

A duck, a roll, and he laughed in its face. "Too slow!"

Let's see just how mad I can get you.

"He's insane," Shirong said numbly, standing by Quan in terrified shock. The other two Dai Li had raised a low wall to break oncoming waves, and stood ready to bend it higher. If that would do any good. He'd read about haima-jiao, certainly; they all had. But the reality....

We've found it. Now what the hell do we do with it?

"No, only focused." Mushi seized both of them by the shoulders, just long enough for a determined shake. "He is buying you time. Think! It draws strength from the water, and from Amaya. How can we best weaken it?"

"How long can Lee even keep standing?" Shirong shot back. "It's pulling from the whole lake-"

"Lee is not drawing his water from the lake," Mushi said firmly. "Look!"

Mist, was Shirong's first thought. Followed hard by, *Why is mist just there, near Lee's feet-?*

Sweeping feet, shifting from stance to quick stance as Lee led the monster on a mad chase across the beach. Feet that circled, and whirled, as Lee spun himself back upright after a lash of water knocked him down by the sheer force of displaced air....

Firebending! Shirong realized. *Those are firebending stances, the kind they use to gather energy to strike-*

But Lee was pulling up *water*. Out of the shore itself.

Water from the shore is water of the shore, Shirong knew, heart racing. *Not the lake. Not the land.*

And shores were boundaries, in-between places, like the moments of dawn and dusk. Places spirits roamed freely; yet at the same time, places a human *could* fight a spirit, even one with the strength of a murdering sea.

Fight, yes, Shirong knew, still shivering. Win?

Mist spun into another small globe, glowed, *flung-*

An inhuman scream, and the haima-jiao lunged once more.

“So long as he is not bending the same water, it cannot seize him,” Mushi said fiercely. “You are earthbenders! Cut away its strength!”

Quan gave the gray-haired tea-maker a narrow look; then nodded, flinging a subtle gesture at Shirong before gathering the other two and arcing a long wall into the lake.

Gee, thanks, Shirong thought dryly, grabbing Mushi right back. “You couldn’t know we’d be here. You must have had another plan-”

“Ah, yes.” Reaching around, Mushi took a roll of pine-dark cloth and a capped skin off his shoulder. A full skin, that sloshed, and didn’t smell *anything* like water.

“...Remind me to never, *ever* get you mad at me,” Shirong said faintly.

Mushi’s smile was wry, and bittersweet. “Do you know spirit-mazes?”

Shirong nodded. That, and every other nasty spirit-trick he could hunt down in the archives, plus anything he could persuade out of people from beyond the Wall.

“Then let us give this creature a night it will never forget.”

Let me die.

She didn’t want to look. She didn’t want to see. She didn’t want to feel the cold, cruel pleasure of hunting Zuko across the shore with waves and water-whips and fangs-

“Amaya!”

No! She didn’t want to hear her student plead, she didn’t-

“Amaya, damn it, wake up! It’s lying to you!”

That... didn’t sound like pleading.

“It feels like it’s angry, but it’s not! Not like you and me. It’s just *empty*. A hole in the water. It eats and eats, but it can never fill that hole up. That’s why it hates us!

“It makes *you* feel empty. That’s how it uses you! It makes you alone, and scared, and *lost*. Makes you feel like you can’t *get* angry, like that’s giving it what it wants-”

A flicker of vision, as the strength of the lake seemed to shrink. Zuko dodged a spray of ice daggers, vanishing in a cloak of steam. Fire in water confounded the sense of fire-in-flesh; made her tormentor slow, like a lull in the storm.

“It’s lying.” Zuko’s voice was low and dangerous as he stalked out of the fog, glaring defiance into dripping fangs. “You think your tribe faces off things like this by community, by *water*. That’s what the other waterbenders thought! That’s why they died!”

No, get back, get away-! Helplessness washed over her, and she felt a contented snarl.

Thin mist blocked some of the next wave, but not all. Water yanked Zuko from his feet, fangs tore-Shredded brown cloth, as Zuko kicked free of his over-robe and rolled to his feet, dagger in hand. “You beat it because when you care about your family, you feel,” Zuko panted. “And feeling is fire, Amaya! *Get angry!*”

What-?

You are alone. Outcast from your tribe. Condemned by your own hands; who would take back one who has served their enemies? You are mine!

But she’d never done it to serve anyone. She’d done it because... because....

Huojin.

Just a little boy, lost and crying on the streets. An innocent young troublemaking scamp, like Jinhai was now, who’d done nothing to deserve the death hunting him.

I did it because I had to. Because he needed me. He needed someone, and I was there, and how could I call myself a healer if I let a child die when I could do something....

Loneliness pounded her like a tsunami, driving her down-

No.

No, I won’t let you.

I have a family. It’s not my tribe. It’s small and hidden and broken. But it doesn’t give up. Not now. Not ever.

You should have settled for me, haima-jiao! That’s my student you’re trying to kill. And you can’t have him!

A hiss of waves; a torrent of images, all the pain and aggravation and fear for the rest of her hidden folk Zuko had brought home to roost. *Hate him! Hate, and destroy!*

And it was all true - and all lies. *No*, Amaya thought, and felt shattered boundaries of herself draw together, hardened by growing anger. *You hate us, because you envy us; because we are warm and breathing and alive, in a way you can never be. I could never hate Zuko. I am angry with him, for doing something so stupid and wonderful and brave....*

And he’d done it for her. She *knew* that, clear as she could suddenly see the beach, the Dai Li raising walls to cut the strength of water, Mushi’s intent discussion with Shirong as they moved sand in subtle patterns. Surely they had a safer plan. Surely, they could have waited.

But Zuko had put himself on the line, here and now. To get her *angry*.

Give up, bastard, Amaya thought, focusing all her will on one hand. If she could win that back, even a twitch of her fingers.... *You’re going to die!*

Foolish little life. None here are strong enough to defeat me!

Water surged, and stone shattered.

No time to think. No time to ask if Mushi had a plan B. Only a moment to stomp and thrust-

Shirong felt something more solid than water hit his raised wall; Lee surfaced through the grasping waves, gasping for air.

Flinging his gloves, Shirong grabbed, and yanked.

“Owe you one,” Lee managed, dripping on sand as rock flew back to Shirong’s hands.

“We’ll settle up later,” Shirong said plainly. “Don’t drip on the lines.” More trenches in the beach than lines, but still....

Lee’s smirk would have looked right at home on a dillo-lion. “Uncle?”

“A few moments more,” the older man stated, digging and pouring. “Fortunately, it is distracted by breaking the walls-”

Ice slashed like razors, and Shirong knew it hadn’t been distracted enough.

Oh. Red, so red; why was everything red when the world was so cold? That’s going to hurt....

For some, war slows the world.

Iroh felt his pulse stretch into slow beats, as Zuko spun to their falling ally and renewed walls of stone ground glacier-slow out of the lake. He was closer to the shore than his nephew and Shirong, closer to danger....

Which was precisely where he wanted to be.

Wait.

Fangs lunged for him, slow as thread unraveling.

Wait.

A scaled foot of water drifted down, crossing sandy trenches-

Now!

A breath, and flames roared up from poured lamp oil, will pushing them ever higher. Just high enough to conceal the sphere of fire Iroh breathed and shaped around himself, stepping *through* stunned water until one hand touched chilled, struggling flesh-

He snapped open the firethorn robe, wrapping it about Amaya in one swift swirl. Breathed, and stepped....

Out of the water. Out of the maze. Fire still blazing behind them.

Old smoke, indeed.

Lost!

Flesh gone, waterbender gone, lake’s strength being sliced away by stone. It writhed in the maze of flames, bewildered. Prey... prey did not do this....

Prey.

One still touching water, touching its power; blood and fear and *alone* slinking through its defenses....

Mine.

“Zuko....”

Fire around his hands; Agni, let Uncle be distracting the others, there was no *way* he could explain this, he was too tired to use water and he couldn’t let Shirong die-

“Zuko.” His mother’s voice, warm and sweet as smoke-sugar. “Come home.”

No. You’re not real. Yet he couldn’t stop himself from rising, and walking toward her.

No! Damn it, you know it’s lying! Shirong is bleeding and you have to-

But it wasn’t just his mother, it was her and Azula; and his sister was *smiling*, glad to see him, and he wanted it so much, he would have given his heart if it had been real....

Fire is passion.

Love and rage and fire slammed home, steel sinking in to the hilt.

Never give up without a fight.

“You got him,” Shirong whispered, as the black jelly of a dying sea-kamuiy slid off white-hot steel. “Good job.”

We all did a good job, the agent knew, feeling the cold creep back in. He should care about that, but he was so tired....

Not a bad way to go. My city is safe. My people....

Weren’t safe. Not yet. He hadn’t told Lee, he *had* to tell Lee-

“Shirong.” An exhausted sob; Lee’s hands grabbed his, hot as embers. “Do you trust me?”

Silly question to ask a dying man. But he tried to nod.

“Don’t give up. Just- don’t give up....”

Darkness. And light. And something burning inside, he couldn’t bear it, he’d be nothing more than ash and smoke on the wind-

Don’t give up.

Like breaking through a crust of lava, and still somehow breathing. The fire was everywhere, burning....

Easing. Like banked coals, warming winter-chilled skin. Shirong took a soggy breath, coughed-

And kept breathing.

...Huh. Didn’t see that coming.

Daring, he opened his eyes. “You look like hell.”

“Thanks,” Lee muttered, ghost-pale and shaking. “Sorry about the reports.”

“Reports?” Shirong echoed, confused. But just for a moment. *That’s right. I’m alive. Which means I have to write up what happened. Damn.* “Are you trying to kill my will to live?”

Lee smirked at him. Turned a little, creaky as an old man, to look Quan in the eye. “Anybody else hurt? Please tell me there’s not....”

“Bumps and bruises. We’ll keep.” Quan crouched beside Shirong, face almost blank with amazement as he took in the healing scars raking the agent’s chest. “Damn. I was sure you were....” He whistled. “Healer Amaya’s a good teacher.”

“Yes, she- Master Amaya!” Lee tried to jump to his feet; staggered, would have fallen if Quan hadn’t caught him. “Uncle- *Uncle?*”

Eyeing the tea-maker whispering sweet nothings in the drenched healer’s ear - and her desperate clutch on his robes - Shirong raised an eyebrow.

“...That’s just not *fair*,” Lee managed.

“Indeed,” Shirong stated wryly. “The *hero*’s supposed to get the girl. You know, the handsome prince, or the injured, bleeding common bender who saved the day in the nick of time? It’s a fundamental law of the universe!”

Mushi lifted his head enough to smile at them, mysterious as a cat-owl. “And what makes you think the hero did not?”

Lee clapped a hand to his forehead.

Shirong snickered. And couldn’t stop. “Oh, Oma and Shu... don’t make me laugh, it *hurts*....”

But it was a good hurt. Pain meant he was alive.

We’re alive, and it’s dead... and I’ll be able to tell Lee about the bison. Soon.

Chapter 18

Dawn. Amaya could see it in the light filtering through the window-shades. Hear it, in the quiet grumble of Zuko getting breakfast started. Feel it, as Mushi yawned and stretched beside her, warm as the hot rocks wrapped in blankets on her other side.

“Good morning,” Mushi said politely, eyes sleepily half-open. “Are you warm enough?”

“If I were any warmer, I’d be in a sauna,” Amaya stated crisply. What was he up to? He’d always behaved like a perfect gentleman in the past, and she couldn’t have fallen through a winter-frozen lake last night-

Memory crashed like an ice shelf into the sea, and she shivered. *No. No...*

“It is over. Amaya, brave lady, it *is* over.” He caught her hands before she could push away, giving her an intent look. “You saved Agent Bon, you know.”

“I... no, I tried to kill him....”

“You sheathed him in ice,” Mushi said bluntly. “He held on long enough for us to revive him. So you *did* save him.”

“It’s not enough,” Amaya whispered. Yunxu, an agent whose name she’d never known... they were dead. Because she hadn’t been fast enough. Wise enough. Strong enough.

“It never is,” Mushi said quietly, sitting up. “Evil comes, and we do our best to defy it. But always, there is a loss.” He regarded her gravely. “That is the cost of courage. To face evil, because if you did not, more lives would be shattered. Courage scars us all, Amaya. My nephew’s is simply more visible than most.”

“I...” Amaya swallowed, and tried again. “I hurt inside.”

“I know.”

“I want to hurt something else,” she admitted, ashamed. “But it’s already dead, and... I know everyone was doing their best to find it, and...” *Speak the truth.* “Zuko fought it off!”

“My nephew is a *firebender*,” Mushi said bluntly. “He could raise fire in his very veins, to beat it back. And even so, he says it was too close. Sometimes all our training and power fails us.” He released her hands, and gestured toward the kitchen. “But when we have fallen, and the battle has passed... that is when we must cling most tightly to hope, and find the courage to reach out to our friends. For the truest will come to us, and help us stand again.”

He means it. Tears threatened; she’d been so cold and alone, and he was still that same sun-warm rock she could rely on, faithful and kind....

And still, there was that glint of mischief in green eyes, playful and not quite innocent. Amaya lifted her chin. “Get out there, and let a respectable lady dress in peace.”

Mushi snapped his fingers, obviously disappointed. Grinned at her, bowed, and departed.

“Reprobate,” she murmured, not unkindly.

It wasn’t the best breakfast she’d ever had, but it was warm, and filling; overall, much better than

she'd expected. "Huojin wasn't sure either of you could cook," Amaya remarked. And wished she dared pound her head on the table. *Not as rested as I thought.*

Zuko snorted, humor dancing in his eyes. Mushi chuckled. "I did enjoy having a cook in the past," he admitted. "But after I came home from campaign once half-dead from bad food, my late wife insisted I learn, in self-defense. And so I later taught our son, and my nephew. She was a brave woman, my Natsu. Not everyone dares to unleash a proud soldier on a kitchen!"

Amaya had to smile, imagining that indignant young soldier. "I would have liked to have met her."

"Me, too," Zuko said softly. "If Mom had been there...."

Mushi rested a hand on his nephew's wrist. "Your mother was only a child then herself, and Shidan and Lady Kotone avoided the capital as much as they could. With good cause. Do not take guilt for what was. Focus on what is."

Words that cleansed and stung at once, like salt on wounds. Amaya sucked in a breath. "The children - down the stairs-"

"We didn't go down there." Zuko inhaled the rest of his breakfast, rinsing out his bowl in a hurry. "I'll go. Tell me what I'm looking for, are they going to be hurt?"

Amaya winced. "It's Jet."

"What?"

For once, Huojin heard Lee coming before he saw him.

"...Idiotic, obsessed, isn't going to take anything less than *maiming* as a hint...."

Wouldn't want to be on the other end of that, the Guard reflected. "Min again?" he asked, straightening from where he'd been officiously leaning against the wall beside the clinic door. "You're early." Dropping his voice as the young man neared, he nodded toward inside. "Is Amaya all right? Headquarters got orders to post a guard, but not go in...."

"She's shaken up. She's tough." Lee took a deep breath, and reached for the door. "It's going to be ugly."

What happened? Huojin wanted to ask. But bit his tongue. If Lee could have told him on the street, he would have. So he touched his sword and followed, instead.

Blood, and death. Faint. But you could taste it, if you knew the air.

"Huh," Lee muttered to himself. "They cleaned."

"Cleaned?" Huojin said uneasily, following Lee to a slight stain beside the screen to the garden. If that wasn't faint traces of blood spatter, he'd retire to carve wooden tops. "What happened?"

"You're not going to like it...."

You're right. I don't, Huojin decided, as they quickly searched the clinic's upper level while Lee recounted the mad events of last night. Spirits that could take over benders... brr.

And he just *knew* Lee had downplayed how much danger he'd been in. "*I made it mad until it jumped into the maze.*" *Sure.* "But Amaya's alive?"

“She’ll be okay. She just needs time.” Lee smiled faintly. “Uncle’s taking her to work. Hot tea, friendly customers... a haima-jiao couldn’t get her there if it tried.”

“But it’s dead- right. For the shock.” Amaya’s mind might know it was dead. If this was anything like a more ordinary assault, her body and spirit would take a lot more convincing. “So what are we really looking for?” Given the Dai Li had apparently clung to their usual mysterious ways and tried to eliminate any sign that something had happened here.

“Something I don’t think I’ll find.” Lighting a lamp, Lee led the way belowground, and sighed.

Rounding the last corner of the stairs himself, Huojin regarded the empty room. “No one’s here.”

“Not anymore.” Lee shook his head. “Jet, Smellerbee, and Longshot. The Dai Li had them here for questioning.” He looked down, shoulders slumped. “I didn’t look down here last night. Neither of us did, we were trying to save Amaya...”

“Sometimes, things don’t work out,” Huojin admitted. “Lee. I know you’re used to being responsible for people. We feel that way in the Guard, too. But when your back’s against the wall and someone you rely on is in trouble... you do the best you can with what you know and where you are. You’re alive. Amaya’s alive. The haima-jiao isn’t going to kill anyone else.” He crossed his arms, and gave Lee a sidelong glance. “So chin up, take a deep breath, and keep moving. You pulled off a damn *miracle* last night. Stop whining because you’re not perfect.”

Lee gave him an angry look, that slowly melted into embarrassment. “Was I whining?”

Huojin lifted a hand, rubbed thumb and forefinger together. “Just a little.”

“Sorry.” Lee shrugged, still a little red. “I just... I feel bad about *really* only feeling upset because I’ll have to tell Amaya.”

“Yeah, well, good riddance,” Huojin said darkly. “I warned them. You warned them. Amaya warned them. And you warned them *again*. You can’t save all the idiots from themselves.” He shrugged, deliberately. “So you’re handling the clinic today?”

“At least the emergencies,” Lee nodded. “Closing early, though. Don’t want her to worry where I am after dark.”

“I’ll leave word at headquarters where to find you if we need you,” Huojin nodded. The Guard already had their apartment marked down, just in case.

“You can get a message to the Dai Li?”

“We can,” Huojin agreed warily.

“Good.” Looking a little more determined, Lee headed for the stairs. “I want to make sure Agent Shirong doesn’t slip through the cracks just because we all *think* he’s better.” He cast a faint smile over his shoulder. “And... do you know where in the market I can find some hickory wood, powdered sugar, and grape acid?”

“What for?” Huojin asked, beyond confused.

“You never had smoke-sugar when you were a kid?”

“Well... yeah, I think so, but... you know how to make it?”

“Sweet tooth,” Lee admitted shamelessly, grinning. “Mom showed me how a long time ago. Before... before a lot of things.” He shook off the gloom. “You want the recipe?”

Oh, did he *ever*.

“You work for that man?” Amaya shook her head as they walked back up to Mushi’s apartment through afternoon shadows.

“There is no shame in honest work,” her host proclaimed. “And tea lightens the cares of those who visit us. Though it never does seem to work on my nephew,” he mused.

“There’s only so much a warm drink can handle,” Amaya pointed out wryly. “How long do you intend to put me up when I have a perfectly good home to go to?” *I hadn’t realized what a cheapskate Pao is.* The small fees Zuko was entitled to as an apprentice were more important than she’d realized.

“Until you feel ready to face the violence that occurred within that home,” Mushi said plainly, opening their door and bowing her in. “Or at least so long as you are willing to allow us this kindness. It is what friends do for one another. And a small enough recompense for the harm we did you, unknowing.”

“Harm?” Amaya frowned as he closed and latched the door.

Mushi sighed, and gestured toward the table. “Tea?” he said hopefully.

She lifted a brow, still standing. “An explanation, first.”

He inclined his head; *as you wish*. “You told me it was dangerous for a young waterbender to live with so little family. I failed to consider it might be as perilous for you, even though you are well trained. And so I turned away your offer of family, without explanation.”

“You said it was dangerous,” Amaya pointed out.

“It is,” Mushi acknowledged. “But we nearly lost you. And that would have been... horrible to bear.” He sighed. “So. In trying to protect you, I did you harm. It seems a custom of my family.... I would mend that harm, in some small way. So that you may know what it is you risk *now*, rather than wait until we must flee Ba Sing Se for Jinhai’s sake, or our own.” He lowered his voice. “With the haima-jiao gone, we are no longer watched. It is safe to speak of such things. If you wish.”

Her breath caught. He was offering one of the things she valued most in the world: truth. And yet.... “Don’t. Don’t tell me, just because you feel you’ve wronged me. You haven’t.”

“It is more than that,” Mushi said firmly. “You are dear to me, Lady Amaya. Were I another man, I would have hopes... but I would, at least, have no lies between us. That much comfort, I would claim.” He drew a breath, and met her gaze. “I am Iroh. Son of Fire Lady Ilah, and Fire Lord Azulon.”

For a long moment, the words didn’t make sense. *Couldn’t* make sense. Azulon; son of Sozin, the Fire Lord who’d begun a century of war. Azulon, the name she and everyone she knew had grown up cursing for his failed assault on the North Pole, and his merciless decimation of the Southern Water Tribe. And Iroh was another name to conjure nightmares. Crown prince, before Ozai took the throne; ruthless general and firebender beyond compare, who had conquered his way across half the Earth Kingdom and held Ba Sing Se under siege for six hundred days.

The Dragon of the West.

“You can’t be,” Amaya whispered, gaze sweeping frantically across the kind, gentle man in Earth Kingdom green. Warm hands, a shoulder to lean on; gentle correction when his nephew needed it most....

Zuko. If his brother is Zuko’s father, then-

Her mind shied from the thought. “You’re a *tea-maker*. You can’t be... General Iroh.”

“Retired,” Iroh said gently. And smiled, sadly. “I have always taken comfort in tea.”

“You *can’t* be,” Amaya insisted, panic and hurt and anger mixing together like foaming wine. “Not Sozin’s blood, not-” Words failed her.

“The source of all evil in the world?” Iroh said wryly. “I have heard us called that before. And yes. Sozin was evil. Not because he meant to be. Because he believed that he alone knew how to remake the world into perfection, and set out to do so - even if he must murder an entire race.” Iroh sighed. “I did not realize that was evil. Not when I knew him, when I was still a young man. To me he was Grandfather, and Fire Lord; the ultimate power in our land. If he had started a war, he *must* be in the right.” He shook his head, looking into memory. “It was only with time, and great pain, that I learned how wrong he was. That the beauty, the very hope of the world lies in the fact that it is not perfect, and we must find ways to cherish what is good in it despite that. For reshape the world as we will, none of us is perfect; and if we cannot love one who is flawed, love itself will die. As my brother’s died, for all of us. I was too kind. Ursa was too gentle. Zuko... Zuko was too weak, with no desire for power. We were human, and so we failed my brother.”

They failed Fire Lord Ozai. And hadn’t she hoped for that? That all of the Fire Nation would fail, and the war finally be over? And yet.... “You *are* the war,” Amaya whispered brokenly.

“I was,” Iroh admitted, unflinching. “But when we broke the Outer Wall, and invaded, I lost - much. Good men. Far too many good men. Including my son, Lu Ten. I was... horrified. Near mad with grief. He was all I had left. Or so I thought. But I was also the officer in command, the Dragon of the West. I had to think of my men, and of the Fire Nation. Terrain, numbers, morale; the earthbenders’ advantage was too great to overcome without losses that would devastate my troops. Only slaughter or treachery would bring Ba Sing Se down, and I did not wish either. So I ordered the siege ended, our troops withdrawn. Against all orders Azulon had given.” He hesitated. “I did not expect to survive that order.”

A firebender, breaking loyalty.... Amaya shivered.

“Once I recovered, I expected to be executed for treason. But events spared me. Now... now I would end the war, if I could. But more than that, I wish the boy I have raised as a son to survive.” Iroh spread empty hands. “Now you know the truth of us, and what you risk by allying with my brother’s outcast kin. And you must decide if we are worth it.”

“You,” Amaya breathed, voice gradually rising, “you reckless, impossible - Tui and La, he is *definitely* your nephew, you’re both *utterly insane*!”

It took at least five minutes of yelling for her to figure out Iroh had preemptively vaporized all the water in the apartment.

But that was all right. Zuko could draw water out of wet sand - and where, exactly, did his uncle think he’d learned that little trick?

Air was harder to draw from than a lake-damp shore. But not by much.

Over the course of sixteen years, especially over the past few months, Zuko had cultivated an intuitive sense for when Things Were About To Blow Up.

It was the little details, mostly. A certain glint in Azula's eye. A scuff of a boot too close in an alley. A tremble of earth that ought to be solid.

And sometimes, it was not so little things. Zhao. The hunch of the Avatar's shoulders, before he turned with mad, glowing eyes. Or, like now, a half-dozen fellow dwellers on this floor at the far end of the corridor from Uncle's apartment, splitting upset looks between each other and the faint sounds of Amaya yelling.

"You're here?" The landlord pushed his way to the front, glaring at Zuko. "You're not supposed to be here! Water's frozen all over the place! How can it be freezing in here when you just got here?"

"Because I didn't do it?" Zuko glared back. "I'm not the only waterbender in the city."

"Well, you're the one who lives in this building!" The landlord pointed an imperious finger. "Fix this!"

I am not going to feed him his finger.

Lee's impulse, born of the tribes' historical feuds; more than a little startling, when he was far more used to the glass-razor insults or explosive lethal violence of Fire Nation politics.

Make an enemy maim himself. Yeah, that's Water Tribe.

Well. He was not going to do that, no matter how tempting. But he couldn't let this pass, either. Lee was Amaya's apprentice. What he did reflected on her - and not even the Dai Li ordered Amaya around.

Zuko drew himself up to his full height, and stared the landlord straight in the eye. Not overtly threatening. Not *yet*.

Beads of sweat broke out on the man's forehead, and he blinked first. "...Please?"

"Give me some time." Warily, Zuko approached his own door. Knocked, and opened it. "Master Amaya? There's ice all through the building..."

The room wasn't quite as much of a wreck as he'd feared. Chairs were upended. Amaya was panting hoarsely, stance firm as a winter-locked lake. Ice. Uncle in the middle of the ice. Which made him want to throw weeks of caution to the wind and *do something*-

But Uncle was only in ice up to his neck. Meaning he was frozen because he *wanted* to be frozen.

Okay, there is something I can do. "What do you want me to do with the witnesses?" Zuko deadpanned.

Amaya flushed, mortified, seeing curious faces edge near in the hall. Uncle Iroh tried not to snicker. Much.

"We'll straighten this out," Zuko said to the hallway at large, and firmly closed the door. Waited a minute, and turned around.

Nobody's dead. Good.

Uncle was still a bit damp, and Master Amaya more than a little pink. And neither of them were quite looking at each other. In a way that raised the hairs on the back of Zuko's neck.

No, no, not good, what do I do, where do I hide, should have kept quiet, they know I'm here-

Panic and exhaustion and two people he cared about were *fighting*, which meant it was *his* fault, again....

Thank Agni for windows.

"He won't come down?"

"Not yet, no," Iroh sighed, picking up the last of the groceries Zuko had dropped in his sudden flight. Raising a brow at some of what he'd found. *So you meant for us to celebrate. It appears I have unfortunate timing.*

"He's a teenage boy, who hasn't had supper," Amaya said confidently. "He will." Gave Iroh a second look at his silence. "Won't he?"

"He is quite capable of remaining up there for days, only venturing down to carry out his duties as he has given word to do," Iroh said unhappily. Caught her frown, and sighed. "It is not defiance, I think...."

Comprehension dawned, and Amaya winced. "His parents fought."

"Not at first," Iroh clarified. "But as my nephew passed four - yes. Often." He hesitated. "You have seen this before?"

"More than I like to think," Amaya admitted. "And it *is* defiance. Of a sort. You can hurt each other, you can scare me to death, but you can't *make me watch*." She sighed herself. "Parents can't hurt what they can't catch. I would say Lee's been teaching himself not to get caught for a very long time."

It cut to the bone. "I should have seen--"

"Children are good at hiding things. They want their parents to be all right. No matter what." She touched his shoulder. "It's odd, but... this almost tells me more about the war than anything else."

Iroh raised a curious brow.

"Sozin destroyed an entire nation to shape the world the way he wanted it," Amaya said quietly. "How much more harm did he do to his own people?"

"I have made my own choices to fight, and to stop," Iroh said plainly. "As must we all. Though I have hopes that our plan will show our people another way forward...." He felt a flicker of fire, and breathed a quiet sigh of relief. "I apologize, nephew."

"Uncle." Zuko slipped back in through the window, still wary. "You don't... I just... I should have known it... wasn't what I thought."

"How?" Amaya said practically. "From what your uncle and Huojin have told me, you've never lived around people who just have normal arguments."

“...No. Not really.” Zuko looked between them both, tension easing a little. “It is- was it something I did?”

“No,” Iroh said firmly, heartened. Courage in battle, Zuko had in plenty. Courage to face the ghosts of his past, and come back... his nephew *was* healing. “It was merely between us. Explanations, long overdue.” He gripped Zuko’s shoulder lightly. “Come. Dinner; and I see you have the makings of smoke-sugar. A fine treat.”

“Smoke-sugar?” Amaya asked, curious.

“After dinner,” Iroh assured her. “My nephew has a light touch with the bubbles.”

“Bubbles?”

Iroh grinned at her.

And smiled again later, enjoying the warmth of company as Amaya crunched into her first translucent bubble of blown sugar, filled with savory gray hickory smoke.

For life is sweet, and fragile, and always spiced with surprise, Iroh thought, enjoying his own silvery-gray globes. *Especially for children of fire.*

He waited until Zuko was about to bite into his third to deadpan, “She knows who we are.”

Crunch.

Choking on inhaled smoke, Zuko gave him a glare that should have set *ice* on fire.

“It explains a great deal,” Amaya noted gently. “I couldn’t understand why you were both so sure the Fire Nation’s time was nearing an end.” She laid her hand on the table near Zuko’s, almost touching. “But if the crown prince is a waterbender...”

Zuko looked down, and swallowed. “The Fire Lord is cruel.” A breath. “But Azula... my sister is *insane*.” He glanced up at Amaya, green eyes pleading. “If we can do this, if we can show you can live without following the Fire Lord - there are great names who won’t pledge loyalty to her. And if they can do that, if they can look after their people and get them *out* of the war.... If the Avatar’s supposed to be about balance, then he can’t destroy all of the Fire Nation. It’d be tactically sound for him to spare the noncombatants. It’d be the *smart* thing to do.”

“Unfortunately, the Avatar is twelve, and an airbender devoted to peace,” Iroh said gravely. “So we do not know if he will find wisdom in time, or listen to those who know war. We can only hope, and prepare.”

“I can see how that would work for the future,” Amaya allowed. “But here and now-”

“You can’t give a traitor orders,” Zuko said harshly. “I gave my word to capture the Avatar. But he’s *not here*.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t know, Master Amaya. I don’t *know*. I’m here. My people are here. I’m going to do everything I can. But when I make plans... things happen. Things go wrong. Always. So I’m just going to try. As long as I can.”

“Which is all anyone can ask,” Iroh said firmly. “Do not dwell on it, nephew. We have all had very trying days. I am certain all will look brighter, once we have had some rest.”

“I know I’ll feel more at ease when I’ve had a chance to check Shirong for myself,” Amaya said gravely. “If he’ll allow me.”

"He knows it wasn't your fault," Zuko said soberly.

She arched a skeptical brow. "As you do about the Avatar?"

"Oh, no," Iroh stepped in, before blood could be drawn. "I saw the boy let the Ocean take him. That was *definitely* Avatar Aang's fault." He *hmp*ed. "One would think a bender trained under Monk Gyatso, one of the most legendary airbending masters, would have been more wary of the spirits."

"He probably thought he could make friends with it," Zuko griped. "How do you know that about Gyatso? I've never heard anything about legendary airbending masters."

"There are sources of information the Fire Lord would not approve of," Iroh said practically. "Once I had a name, I could make inquiries. None of which yielded information that would have helped in our chase," he added at Zuko's dark look. "But I was curious. Especially when I found he counted Avatar Roku among his truest friends."

"Can you tell me about him?" Zuko didn't squirm under his gaze, though he did redden. "He thought I was someone else. I just want to know who."

Iroh hid a chuckle. "Ah. Well, if I were to guess.... It is likely he thought you were your mother's grandfather." He shrugged. "The records I have seen say nothing of Kuzon knowing Aang, but there *is* a mention of Gyatso."

"Being a spirit must give you lousy eyesight," Zuko grumbled. "Do I look a century old?" Glancing at Amaya, he tensed, and made himself relax. "So... you look like you need to talk a little more, so... just call me off the roof when you're done."

That swiftly, he was gone again.

Iroh raised a brow at the healer.

"You're hiding something," she said levelly.

"A suspicion, only," he admitted. "I cannot see that it would make any difference--"

"Iroh."

Ah, how sweet to hear his real name from such a vision of beauty and courage... er. Was that a snowball in her hands? "I do not think it would help my nephew to know," Iroh answered, sensing for fire to be certain that nephew was out of earshot. "I have no proof. And I can think of none that would prove such wild fancies, truly."

"Tell me."

Iroh sighed. "When Zuko was in the spirit world, he looked for Kuzon for aid. A wise move; they were kin, even though they had never met, for Kuzon died before my nephew was born. And I later learned it was not a natural death, though he was ninety-eight; he was a strong firebender, and I would not have been surprised if he had reached Sozin's age. But he was on Azulon's list." Iroh paused. "Zuko looked, but he did not find. And it has been my experience that spirits know *precisely* whom they are speaking to."

Amaya let her snowball melt back into her cup. "...I can see why you don't want to tell him."

"Do you?" Iroh asked quietly. "My nephew has been so lonely, so full of pain. Shall I tell him that

once he had family who loved him truly, and joy, and a life of peace? Shall I tell him that the Avatar was granted Gyatso as friend and mentor in two lives, yet the spirit who was once Aang's friend is now counted among his enemies?" He shook his head. "My nephew has reason enough to resent fate's blows. There is no need to add more."

Amaya nodded. "Will you ever tell him?"

"When the time is right." When Zuko knew enough of the White Lotus to know why they existed. And why they had not acted before.

Another, more deliberate nod. "Are you hiding anything else?"

"Much," Iroh answered honestly. "But nothing else that bears on here and now."

"So you say." Standing, Amaya folded her arms, and gave him a measuring look. "You don't have enough family. One nephew can't keep you honest."

Iroh kept a curious look on his face as he tried to decipher that inscrutable look. "I have been hoping he would find a nice girl, but there was Jet's interference to consider, and we have been very busy...."

"He's not the one who needs a nice girl." Blue eyes danced. "Though I don't think I've been nice for a few decades."

Slowly, Iroh smiled.

He did remember to tell Zuko it was safe to come back down. Later.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Again, don't own episode dialogue, especially from "Lake Laogai."

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Warm, Shirong thought drowsily, curled on rocks in the Dai Li's borrowed palace garden. Tugged his hat a bit lower, eyes still shut; no point getting burned if he fell asleep out here. Which he might. Like most spirits of malice, the haima-jiao hadn't just wounded his body. His chi was thin, depleted; he didn't feel up to much beyond flicking a pebble, even resting directly on nurturing earth. Sunlight seemed to help, sinking into his veins like a blessing, but when he thought of what he meant to ask of Lee....

Stay calm, and rest, Shirong advised himself, feeling familiar footsteps on the earth. *Ask him, and let him think. He's creative. Don't count it a lost cause just because you won't be in shape to help.*

"I didn't think anybody could make rocks look comfortable," Lee said wryly.

Shirong cracked an eye open to blink at the healers, shifting a shoulder in an abbreviated shrug. "Earth helps us heal." He glanced at Amaya directly. "Are you well? Lee was shaken up, and it barely touched his spirit; malicious kamuï can make the strongest of us feel as though we've struggled free of a midden."

"I'm healing," Amaya said quietly. "May I?"

"Just don't ask me to look," Shirong stated, lifting clear the top layer of his robe. "I'm still not sure I want to know how close it was."

"I can see why." Water-wrapped hands smoothed coolness over his skin, soothing small aches. "Hmm."

From another healer, that would have worried him. But Amaya had a good heart. She wouldn't have sounded thoughtful if there were any danger. "What?"

She withdrew her hands and eyed her apprentice. Who swallowed, but didn't back down. "It froze the life out of him," Lee said plainly. "I just... tried to fix it."

"I think you overdid it," Amaya murmured.

"Overdid what?" Shirong asked pointedly.

Amaya glanced about the garden, and raised a brow in silent question.

"We're alone. Though Quan will be by later," Shirong answered. That hadn't been hard to arrange. Fortunately. Everyone knew Amaya would never betray a patient.

"Lee used a technique I reserve for emergencies," Amaya said simply. "It's dangerous. And even when it succeeds, which it did, it disturbs the patient's chi for several days." She glanced skyward. "You were fighting water and darkness. Until it settles, your chi will be seeking light and fire." She

frowned slightly, then shook it off. "I would say this is the best prescription. Rest, stone, and sunlight." She gave Lee a serious look. "Try not to do that again soon."

The young man nodded, though he did glance wryly toward the Inner Wall. East, toward Lake Laogai.

Right. There's a limit to the promises you can keep when the spirits come knocking, Shirong reflected. *And on that note....* "Could I speak with Lee in private?"

Blue eyes narrowed. "If this is about trying to recruit a boy I haven't even finished training yet--"

"It's not," Shirong said hastily, as Lee looked indignant. "It's... personal." *To me, at least. Though Long Feng won't see it that way.*

I am a Dai Li agent of Ba Sing Se. My city needs me to act. No matter what our leader orders.

It still felt like stepping off a cliff.

Breathe. Act calm. The less people who know, the better chance Lee will have.

If Lee chose to help.

Oma and Shu, please let him. I can't do this on my own.

So he was going to enlist a teenage boy. Wonderful. Too bad he couldn't blame this on a concussion.

The Avatar's teachers are even younger. And Lee's got sense. When he has a chance to think.

Which, oddly enough, reminded him of Temul again. The record had been blisteringly clear on the firebender's tendency to open mouth and insert foot. But there was something more....

He set it aside; Amaya was making her way out of the garden and Lee was frowning at him. Shirong took a reluctant breath, and beckoned him closer. "I need your help."

Lee raked him with a checking-you-for-missing-limbs look he must have picked up from his teacher, and raised that lone brow. "A kamuï?"

"Not... exactly." Shirong sighed. *This is harder than I thought.* "Your uncle asked if there might be a reason the haima-jiao was in the lake. There is." He met fiery green squarely. "The Avatar's bison is under Lake Laogai."

Lee froze. Shirong could see panic trying to clench every muscle in the young man's body, seeking to drive him into flight. But Lee held still, breathing ragged, forcing himself to think. "Why... how... why tell *me*?"

"The Blue Spirit helped the Avatar once," Shirong said levelly. "I grant you, after what happened at the North Pole, he might want to chain the Avatar to a rock and throw him off a pier. But I hope that the man wanted for raiding Pohuai Stronghold might take pity on the citizens of Ba Sing Se. They don't deserve another haima-jiao."

"I don't... understand," Lee got out. "It's an animal. It's smart, but...."

Gently. He's frightened. And angry. I can't blame him. "If the writings about Avatar Kyoshi are right, it's *not* just an animal," Shirong told him. "It's the Avatar's animal guide. They're connected. Spiritually. And when they're separated--"

"The spirits get angry," Lee managed, barely above a whisper. "Oh, *Agni*."

Shirong let out a relieved breath. *He's holding it together. Oma and Shu, that kid is tough.* "I'm afraid it may be worse than that."

"...Of *course* it is," Lee ground out. Sat down on the grass, head lowered, forcing himself through a quick meditation. Let out a sigh, and nodded. "So what's the *bad* news?"

"I found a report from General Fong about the Avatar State," Shirong said carefully. *Found* wasn't exactly accurate; it had landed on him yesterday, while he'd been on light duty sorting paperwork. He'd had a dizzy spell and staggered one way, an officious clerk had jerked another - and an entire shelf had collapsed on top of them. Onlookers had had to dig them both out of the scrolls, and he hadn't even realized he'd carried one off until later. He probably should have returned it, but he'd been sore and *bored*....

He hadn't been bored since. Terrified, yes. Not bored.

"He noted," Shirong went on, still careful as picking his way across a slope of loose scree, "that you could successfully induce this state by threatening something the Avatar cares about."

Lee went white. "Is he *insane*?"

"If he is," *oh, spirits, no*, "I fear the Grand Secretariat may have joined him." Shirong wet his lips. "I can't let this happen to my city. I meant to do... something, but-"

"You'd get skewered before you got near Appa." Lee's voice was grim, green eyes glittering. "Don't. You're too hurt to get away clean, and this is going to have to work right the first time." He blinked, then buried his head in his hands as his own words sank in. "Oh, *hell*...."

Hope stole Shirong's breath. "You don't even have the floorplan!"

"I didn't know the North Pole's, either." Lee lifted his head, smile wry. "At least there won't be a blizzard."

"You broke into the...." Shirong knuckled his brow, trying to ward off a headache. "One of these days, we need to have a *long* talk."

Lee smirked; then shivered, looking into memory. "Fong's crazy. The avatar looks like a twelve-year-old kid. Peaceful. Harmless. But when he's... like that... Aang's not *there* anymore. It's just the Avatar, and the elements. And they're angry at you. They're angry at *everything*."

"You are going to do it." Shirong shook his head, trying to sort out the morass of relief and gratitude and sudden, sharp worry. "I thought, after what you'd seen...."

"The *last* thing I want to do is help Aang," Lee grated out. Clenched his fists; breathed out, and deliberately straightened his fingers. "Just so you know, their plan won't work. Admiral Zhao was arrogant and overconfident, and he never saw the Ocean coming until it was too late. But Zhao's not out there. *Azula* is. She's a military genius. And she's *read the reports*." Lee smirked, cold and bitter. "There's a reason the Fire Lord put *her* on his trail after Zhao failed. If anyone can figure out how to kill an Avatar, she can."

Spirits, Shirong thought, shaken. He'd never even considered that. *Just how high up was his uncle-no. Don't ask. Yet.* "Thank you."

"Don't." Lee's voice was hard. "What you're asking has a cost."

Damn. Well. He'd done terrible things to save his city in the past, what was one more-?

"Tell them I'm not suitable as a recruit."

Shirong blinked, not sure if he should believe his own ears. "What?"

"I'm going to be acting against the Dai Li. You could never be sure I wouldn't do that again."
Lee's eyes were hard as jade. "I lost my honor a long time ago. I won't take yours down with it."

For a long moment, words failed the agent. "...I never believed in the Seven Principles before."

"You know the principles?" Lee asked warily.

"Avatar Kyoshi wrote them down, while she was learning firebending," Shirong explained. *Among other things.* "I thought the Fire Nation she knew was gone. Drowned in a wave of blood." He smiled wryly. "But you're not all gone, are you? Just scattered. Living by your wits." *And your honor.* "Though I suppose even wits have their limit. Tell your uncle everyone is convinced Jet was crazy, and I'm fairly sure no one else had time to notice the flames were too high, but he should be careful heating up steel. I didn't see him ignite your dagger, and if anyone else had there would have already been an arrest... but tell him to stay low for a while. I'd miss his tea."

"...My uncle's not a firebender."

"You," Shirong said dryly, "are a *terrible* liar." He chuckled softly. "I've seen you both move, and I've seen you both fight. What you didn't pick up from Amaya, you definitely learned from him." He shrugged, deliberately casual. "Though I've never heard of any bender taking the time to train someone who can't touch their element...."

"He's *Uncle*," Lee said quietly. "He knows I've got a lousy temper. And awful luck. He tried to train me to stay alive." The waterbender glanced aside. "I wasn't always a good student." Green eyes looked back up, hard. "So what are you going to do?"

"Do about what?" Shirong said practically. "Amaya saved my life. She's saved a lot of lives, no few of them my comrades. If it weren't for your uncle, we'd have lost her. All I intend to do is lie here in the sun and forget that night ever happened. Near-death memories can be very unclear. Or so I've heard." He leaned back against the rocks. "No, I think I'll just rest here and tell you about... well, someplace you'll never see. Since you've declined to be recruited."

Taut as a bowstring, Lee listened.

"Temul," Shirong said, surprised; the fact he'd been searching for finally surfacing from memory with that *intent* look from Lee. "Ask your uncle about Temul. She was a firebender a few centuries back... I think she tried something the opposite of what you've done, adapting waterbending moves to fire." Which hadn't made Avatar Kyoshi happy at all, if he recalled correctly. She'd kept the nations separate with a granite glove behind a golden war fan, and what she would have said about a mixed-blood waterbender probably couldn't be repeated in polite company. "If he knows anything, it might help."

Lee nodded once, obviously committing the name to memory. "The lake?"

"Ah, yes. Well, that's going to be tricky...."

The bison's here. The bison's here.

Oh Agni, what do I do?

Dimly Zuko recalled that Amaya had left him to head for the clinic, sending him on his way to teach Jinhai. He also remembered glaring at a scraggly-headed man who'd tried to pick his belt pouch, and assisting another overeager hand into a wall, before he'd reclaimed enough common sense to get off the streets and up onto the roofs.

No people up here. No conflicting voices to have to sort through for meaning when the whole world wanted to blur into a hiss of noise. Just the wind, and the sounds of the city.

Better.

Breathe. In and out.

You're panicking.

Well, yes. The impulse to either gibber or beat somebody else's brains against the wall *was* a good clue. It wasn't fair, it just wasn't fair; where the bison was the Avatar couldn't be far away, and the plan wasn't ready, he hadn't had enough time-!

You can't panic here.

Basics. When the world fell apart, stick to basics. He had new and unexpected intelligence on an opponent and target, and he was *not* reacting in a combat-ready manner.

Strategic withdrawal. Find someplace secure, and reexamine your information.

Meaning decide on a location, and *move*. Movement would help; movement always helped. Katas, running, fighting. He moved better than he could put things into words. Always.

So move. But move where?

Clinic, or Uncle? The clinic would be safe, but Amaya had no experience with infiltration. She'd probably try to talk him out of this. And he *couldn't* walk away. His word depended on it. The whole *city* might depend on it.

Uncle.

A better tactical choice, given Iroh's experience with combat, strategy, and the Avatar. But it was the middle of the day, and dragging Uncle away from work might draw all kinds of unpleasant attention. Just because the haima-jiao was dead didn't mean they might not still be watched. Like Jinhai might be-

I have a pattern. The Dai Li know that. If I don't show up at the Wen house - they'll know something is wrong.

And broken patterns would lead to curiosity about *why* they'd been broken, and if he *did* get Appa loose-

They could trace it back to Shirong.

Which would be *bad*. Not just for the agent. If they took him, they'd question him - and Shirong didn't have the defenses Amaya had given Lee.

I've got to make things look normal.

Jinhai's house, then.

Move. Just get there. Get somewhere safe.

Work out what to do after.

A glance pinned down where he was. Forcing himself into the narrow focus of *where am I, where am I going*, Zuko settled into a roof-eating lope. And tried not to think.

The Dai Li would have seen him come by way of the rooftops before. This wouldn't look suspicious. He hoped.

I can't take the streets right now. I'll break something. Or somebody.

Which would upset Uncle and Amaya, spirits, what was he going to tell them....

Don't think about it.

Alleys and roofs and balconies, and finally he dropped into a street near the Wen's to at least *look* semi-respectable entering the house....

One step at a time.

"Lee!" Suyin's face was bright; sobered, seeing him. "Is something wrong?"

"I've had better days," Zuko said dryly. Looked past her to Jinhai. "We should stick to simple moves today. What we got Amaya out of... it was close. Too close."

"What did happen?" Meixiang stepped out of the kitchen, giving him a searching look. "You look like you've been raked over shattered ice."

"Close. Almost drowned," Zuko admitted. "There was a man-eating kamiuy. We stopped it." He held up a hand before they could speak. "If you want details, I'll tell you after practice. If I think about it before... it was too close."

Falling. Dodging. Strikes, with foot or fist or bladed hand. He walked them through it all, warmed by how much better they'd gotten in just a few weeks.

I may never teach them again.

No. No, damn it! My people need me. They need me here!

There had to be a way.

Jinhai was panting, glad to flop down in the garden by the time Zuko called a halt. Suyin was just as sweaty, but breathed easier, ducking inside to get her mother with a look of unbridled curiosity.

Stepping out, Meixiang glanced over her sweating children, and gave him a measuring look. "You stopped it?"

"I helped," Zuko stated. And gave them a brief account of that awful night, sparing the goriest details. But not the key facts: the haima-jiao had killed other waterbenders, and tried to do worse to Amaya. "Uncle says it's a spirit of warm oceans; deserts of the sea," Zuko finished. "I wonder if that's why the Water Tribes stay near the poles." *I wonder why something like that never went after Katara; she's been around enough bloodshed to draw them....*

Oh. Idiot. She's always with the Avatar. The haima-jiao might not have been the brightest spirit on the block, but I doubt any of them are that stupid.

"She lost all her people?" Suyin sniffled, and swiped at her eyes. "That's awful."

"You're her people too, you know," Zuko told her. "She cares about you. A lot."

"I know, but... do you think it would help if we told her about the Southern Water Tribe boy here?"

No. It can't be.

The Avatar's bison was here. It damn well *could* be. "What Southern Water Tribe boy?" Zuko ground out.

Jinhai scrunched into his mother's arms, wide-eyed; even Suyin paled. "He- Jia said his name was Sokka...."

Words vanished in a white hiss of fury.

Don't move. Don't do anything.

Head down, fists clenched on his green robe, Zuko breathed. And forced himself to stay still. Move, and the simmering cauldron of rage and fear and frustration would tip over, spilling into a wave of fire that would reach out and *destroy*....

These are your allies. These are your people. Don't move.

"...Back up... tell me where... it's all right, sometimes the great names...."

Meixiang's voice. Worried, but not frightened. Thank *Agni*, not frightened.

Don't give me a target. Please. I'm so angry....

And afraid. So desperately afraid. Everything he'd built, everything he'd tried to plan - it was all coming apart, like folded paper cast into flames.

"...My lord. Can you hear me yet? My lord, my blade is yours, against your enemies...."

She needs me. Zuko forced himself to look up, dragging back words and meaning to human voices.

Meixiang was kneeling in front of him, dagger casting back the sun by her side.

"Don't... do that," Zuko rasped, trying to slow his racing heart. "I'm not your lord."

"Yes," Meixiang said simply. "You are." But she looked up, searching his face with concern. And relief. "You've banked the fury? You can understand my words?"

Zuko flinched. "I- how did you-?"

"It happens to some firebenders." Tension eased from Meixiang's frame. "I knew one, years ago... my grandfather called it dragon's rage. Dragons aren't hatched with the skill to speak; not like humans are. When fury takes them, they can lose the art of it, and words seem but whistles in the wind. So." A graceful gesture toward herself, kneeling. "You are lord here, and you know I follow. This calms the dragon in the blood, and lets you reclaim human words." At his look of confusion, she frowned. "Hasn't your uncle told you this?"

"This... doesn't happen to my uncle." Dragon's blood? He'd heard the legends, like everyone else. *But she can't be serious.*

"But I thought - your family's line-" Meixiang closed her mouth, wincing.

"What do you know about my family?" Zuko demanded.

"I... know you are great names." Meixiang looked troubled. "But if it isn't from your uncle's side, then-" Green eyes widened. "Oh. You said your *mother* was a healer...."

"This isn't her fault!" Zuko blazed. Shuddered, and hauled in his temper with trembling hands. "I just- I'm not good enough. I don't know why it happens, everything just burns inside and the words fly away...."

"Not her fault," Meixiang said firmly. "Her heritage. It happens." She made her blade disappear up her sleeve. "Is this Sokka your enemy?"

He's fifteen. But Azula was fourteen, did it make any difference? "He... has been." Zuko picked his words. "He's an ally of the Avatar. Who has been declared a threat to the Fire Nation."

"Oh." A breath more than a word; eyes green from Amaya's water wincing with hurt. "A task you could never survive alone... spirits, Lee! You're just one bender!"

But I'm not Lee. "Those are the terms," Zuko said harshly. "I gave my word."

Silence, taut between them. Zuko dipped his head, and started to rise. "I'm sorry-"

"My lord, with all due respect - *stay right there.*"

He sank back down, taken aback. *That? Definitely angry Mom mode.*

Which stung his pride; she was *not* his mother, he didn't *need* looking after-

But I need help, Zuko admitted to himself, swallowing the acid burn. *I can't do this on my own. I need any help I can get.*

"I never thought I'd be glad for sitting through so many faculty meetings... what did you promise the Fire Lord to do?" Meixiang said bluntly. "What did you promise, *exactly?*"

"I... I never spoke it to him," Zuko admitted painfully. "He wouldn't see me, after. She- someone delivered the terms...." Terms that had shattered his life, and exiled him forever.

"Wiggle room," Meixiang murmured. Nodded. "So what did you promise to do?"

Even through cloth, fingernails bit into his palms. "To capture the Avatar. End his threat to the Fire Nation. To my people."

"And who are we?" Meixiang said bluntly. "Myself. Huojin. Our children. All of us. Who are we, my lord?"

"...My people." Zuko wiped sweat off his face. "My head hurts." *My heart hurts.*

"I can only imagine." She inched closer, slow and cautious. "Are you going to talk to your uncle?"

Jerkily, he nodded. "Have to," Zuko got out. "There's more than Sokka, you don't know - have to make sure the bison isn't *there* anymore, need to get the damn spirits to stop using the city as

target practice....” White noise threatened to close in again; he cradled his head in his hands.

“Wait. Just a little longer.” Meixiang rose and hurried into the house. Came back shortly, drawing a pale Suyin in her wake. “Go with Lee. Make sure he gets to his uncle, then come home.”

“Okay,” Suyin said uncertainly. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s complicated.” Meixiang bent and whispered something in the girl’s ear. Suyin started, and gulped.

Stepping away, Meixiang regarded Zuko again. “My lord. I trust you will see that my daughter is safe with you.”

So I don’t do anything stupid while she’s there. Zuko clung to that with relief. “I’ll be careful.”

“You’d better be,” Meixiang said bluntly. “We need you. More than you know.”

“What do you mean, he’s not here?”

Suyin tried not to flinch at the raw edge in Lee’s voice. It helped that Pao looked more morose than angry, sniffing a cup of his own tea and groaning. “I mean he quit!” the teashop owner lamented. “That noble rascal Quon offered him his own shop, in the Upper Ring! And he took it! Even after I offered him the position of Senior Executive Assistant Manager!”

“And how would that be different from what he was doing?” Lee said dryly.

“...He’d make more tea?”

Lee looked like he didn’t know whether to laugh, cry, or set something on fire.

“Stay with him, so he stays alive,” her mother had said. *“I’ll explain later. Be careful.”*

Which was even scarier than traveling the Lower Ring on her own. Though walking with Lee seemed to make people she’d usually worry about find other places to be. “It’s good news, right?” Suyin ventured. “He’d want to tell you. And you’re usually at the clinic now.”

For a moment Lee seemed to look *through* her. Focused, and nodded.

“You could talk to him!” Pao almost pounced; thought better of it at Lee’s narrowed eyes.

“Convince him to come back!”

“Uncle loves tea,” Lee said bluntly. “If he left, he’s not coming back.”

Pao wailed as they left.

“You could have been a little nicer,” Suyin scolded him as they went down the street. “Even if you’re having a bad day-”

“You have no idea.” Lee shook his head, and tried to rein in his tone. “Suyin. The last thing Pao needs is for me or Uncle to be there. Things could get... bad. Fast.”

How bad? Suyin wanted to ask. And was afraid to. “Will you tell me? At Amaya’s?”

“Your mother told you to get me to Uncle and *go home*. She doesn’t want you getting hurt.”

Boys! “We don’t want you getting hurt, either!”

“I can’t- you shouldn’t-” Lee gripped the bridge of his nose, and sighed. “Ask Uncle. I’m not... thinking very well right now.”

Well, at least he knew that. Which put him one up on Min.

And Uncle was at the clinic, grinning as he shared tea with Amaya. A grin that slipped into sober worry the moment he saw Lee. “Nephew?”

Lee glanced around the edge of screens that partitioned off resting patients; forced a smile for a mother nursing a no longer feverish baby. Stepped close, so his words wouldn’t reach past the screen. “The bison’s under Lake Laogai.” He jabbed a thumb toward Suyin. “And she knows something about Sokka.” He dipped his head to Amaya. “Master Amaya. I’m... going to go break some ice in your garden. Maybe a lot of ice.”

Silent footsteps, and he was gone.

“Oh, dear.” Uncle looked grave. “What is it you know, Miss Suyin?”

“Well, I....”

Ice creaked and cracked, loud as Min shattering rocks.

“He’s somewhere in the Upper Ring,” Suyin said in a rush. “He has to be, or he couldn’t have fallen into Madam Macmu-Ling’s class. Jia saw him there, he’s Southern Water Tribe, I thought maybe you’d like to talk to him?” She looked at Amaya, eyes wide. “Lee was acting weird *before* I told him - kept the lessons really simple, like he was trying not to think about something - and then when I said Sokka’s name, I thought- it was *scary*!”

“I would think it was,” Uncle murmured. “Tell me what you know, and *exactly* what you saw.”

They’re here, Zuko thought, shards of ice melting around him. Those idiots are here, and I have to do something, I have to!

Something. But what?

Even if I can find him-

Oh, take that as a *given*, where Sokka was the Avatar wouldn’t be too far away.

If I find him - it’s just me, and Uncle, in the middle of Ba Sing Se. If he goes into the Avatar State... thousands of people could get hurt.

Not that he could let that matter when his duty to his nation was on the line.

But... my people are here, too. What do I do? I can’t do nothing, but I don’t know what to-

Panic. An old enemy. He knew the coppery taste of it, the way it bent the world into *enemy* and *destroy* and blocked out any words that argued otherwise.

Reaching back to Uncle’s lessons in survival, Zuko sat down.

Ow.

Knelt, brushed away a few chunks of ice, and sat again. And breathed.

Survival. Basics. What do you have? What do you need?

He had information on the Avatar, and the bison. He needed-

My people. Safe.

If he captured the Avatar, they *would* be safe-

Can I do that? Zuko drove the doubt home, mercilessly. *Lives* were at stake, not just his honor. He couldn't afford to be optimistic. He couldn't afford to be wrong. *He's the Avatar. Master of air. Probably master of water and earth by this time. I'm not even a master of fire. And with water? Katara could thrash me up, down, and sideways. I know healing, but Amaya and I are teaching ourselves combat moves. Against a trained waterbender? We'd be toast.*

He's the Avatar, and he's not alone. And I know how the Dai Li like to keep things quiet. I can't fight them all.

Remember. Remember what Uncle said. Azula could catch the Avatar. But could she hold him? Without killing him?

I... can't.

It hurt. Like fire. Like clutching the shattered edge of an icy lake, cutting and numbing and hurting all the worse for it.

I am not going to cry.

Zuko hugged his knees for long minutes, trying not to think. Pain was not the enemy. People thought it was, but it wasn't. Pain was a warning. *Something is amiss. Something is about to break.*

But he was already broken. There was nothing to do but accept the pain, and wait until he'd suffered enough. Until it sank into his very bones, where it could be acknowledged... and ignored.

I can't capture the Avatar. But I have to protect my people.

Inside and outside the walls; Agni, this was so like the North Pole, how could Avatar be this stupid *twice?*

I wish I could yell at him. I wish I could pick him up and shake him until his teeth rattled-

Something white blew in the wind.

Climb, leap, and scramble; Zuko gained the clinic's roof, snatched paper from the air-

A flyer. Neatly and professionally inked, with a picture of a creature most hadn't seen for a hundred years.

Zuko shook a fist at the sky, wishing he knew enough about air-spirits to castigate them all to the lowest bowels of Koh's lair. *"I know already!"*

"Do you think it was wise to leave him behind?" Amaya frowned as they headed into the Inner Ring, glancing back as if she expected the young firebender to melt out of the crowds.

“He promised he would stay,” Iroh said gravely. *And he keeps his promises. Usually.* “He asked us to scout the situation. That means he is *thinking*.”

“But if he’s planning to-”

“We do not know what he is planning,” Iroh interrupted. “But if he meant to be reckless and impulsive, he would have acted by now.”

Amaya rolled her eyes. “You’re his uncle. Can’t you simply tell him no?”

“Technically? No.”

The healer choked mid-breath, and glared at him. “Tui and La, why not?”

“A crown prince outranks a general,” Iroh said plainly. “If I had ever given him orders in front of the men, it would have undermined discipline. Which is very bad aboard any ship. Much less a ship full of firebenders.”

“...No wonder he had an attitude problem.”

“Part of that was his injury, I imagine, but yes,” Iroh acknowledged. “I was always glad when we could go ashore, away from other eyes. Then I could be the father he needed, and not just an old man of high rank.” He smiled. “In a way, my nephew’s raid on the North Pole was the best thing to happen to us in a long time. Had we not been cut off from the Fire Nation, and cast adrift on our own resources, I would never have been truly able to act as his uncle, and his master. And he needed me. More than I knew.”

“He needs you to tell him *no*,” Amaya said practically.

“I will not,” Iroh said soberly. “His honor and his loyalty are at stake. As are the lives of every being in Ba Sing Se. The longer the Avatar remains here, the more time the Fire Nation has to muster its forces against the city.”

“They’ve tried to conquer us for years.” Amaya cast him a look askance. “You should know.”

“The last siege meant to conquer, yes,” Iroh said soberly. “But the Fire Lord knows full well what strength the Avatar may gain. He *knows* no other creature can hope to slay his armies in their very tracks. So long as the Avatar remains within these walls, the Fire Nation’s goal will *not* be to conquer. It will be to *destroy*.” He had to look away. “You have not seen what Sozin’s line can do, when they wish to destroy. Remember the airbenders. Remember, Sozin’s forces destroyed their nation *within a day*.” He shook his head. “That is what awaits Ba Sing Se, should the Avatar remain.”

Amaya swallowed, pale.

“So. I will argue with my nephew. I will advise him, as best I can. But I will *not* tell him not to act.” Iroh smiled wryly. “We have patched our vessel in the midst of a raging storm. Now we must see if it will hold. And be prepared to bail.”

“...You have tremendous faith in that boy.”

“He has more of his father of him than he wishes to think,” Iroh stated. “And that is not so ill a heritage as you might first believe. His mother was gentle, kind, and honorable. She also avoided conflict unless there was no other choice. And by then, much damage had been done. While my family - well. We have no qualms about striking *first*. And unleashing enough force that no further

blow is needed.” He shrugged. “I have tried to teach him to balance the two. With luck, we have succeeded. Is this the house?”

“The right address, according to the flyer.” Amaya nodded at the small mansion on their right. “That just seems so odd....”

“At the South Pole, we were the only ship in range to see the light of the Avatar’s awakening,” Iroh said plainly. “We made port to find a replacement lotus tile, and found pirates from whom Katara had just stolen a waterbending scroll. Another time we pulled in at a prison barge to re-supply with coal... and found her necklace, and then a bounty hunter who could track them from it. Even traveling by ourselves in the midst of the plains, with no desire or thought of finding the Avatar - we have found bison fur, and met again.” He sighed. “My nephew is a skilled tracker, determined, and well-taught in predicting his foes. But I believe the spirits *want* my nephew to chase the Avatar.” His eyes narrowed. “To chase, but not to catch. So many times, Aang has slipped from his fingers... if I ever meet those who have plotted so cruelly, we will have *words*.”

“Invite me along,” Amaya murmured. “Lee has a gift. He may not be as swift to catch on as some I’ve seen, but he’s thorough. He doesn’t just heal what he sees and assume he’s done. He *listens* to the energies.” She gave Iroh a determined look. “Make this work. I want him *back*.”

Iroh bowed to her, and slipped out of sight behind the Avatar’s house. Took a lump of flint from his sleeve, and quietly banged on the foundation.

Let us hope I am right, and the Blind Bandit sees more clearly than most who think they have eyes.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Toph sighed, and hid a grimace. Bouncing her ball against the wall didn’t quite cover the rustle of Katara and Sokka playing cards, but it did break up the patter of Aang’s anxious feet as he burst back in through the front door with Momo.

“I just finished dropping all the leaflets! Has anyone come in with news about Appa?”

...And the connection Twinkletoes apparently couldn’t make between those two sentences was why Toph sometimes felt like beating her brains out rather than trying to teach him earthbending.

Oh, Aang was good enough to beat the robes off most earthbenders. He had more power than any other bender she’d ever seen, and power could cover for a lot of slipshod bending.

But if he took the time to do it right, he could do so much more....

Aang didn’t *want* to take the time to do it right. Get a move down enough to make it work, and push on. In a way, Toph could understand that. Aang was up against an end-of-summer deadline to throw-down with the Fire Lord, and the more he did before that, the better.

What she couldn’t sympathize with was Aang’s *attitude* toward training. If it’d been her with the fate of the world at stake, she’d be up before dawn and fall into bed only when she couldn’t move any more. Aang seemed to think “train hard” meant “train until I get tired, bored, or spot a butterfly”.

Lesson after lesson, she’d tried to thump that out of him. But every time she got him near the edge, every time she thought she’d get Aang to understand you could go way beyond the point it started to hurt, if you had to-

“It’s only been a day.” Katara fluttered her cards. “Just be patient.”

Yep. In swooped Katara to kiss it better. It made Toph want to tear her *hair* out. Or burrow into the ground and not come out.

She felt Aang’s chin hit the table as he sighed, almost heavy enough to cover the no-nonsense stride walking up to the door. Medium-weight, she’d guess a bit taller than Katara, and definitely a woman....

A knock, and Aang finally realized someone was there. “Wow, you’re right! Patience really pays off.” He swept toward the door. “Hi! Are you here about Appa?”

“I came to meet some distant relatives.” The woman sounded about as old as Toph’s mother. “I hear there are Southern Water tribesmen here?”

“You’re here to see *Sokka*?” Katara’s voice dripped disbelief. “Wait - you’re Northern Water Tribe! What are you doing in Ba Sing Se?”

“Healing, mostly....”

Toph tuned the rest of the pleasantries out, struck by a familiar rhythm echoing through the floor. That was... the opening theme of the Earth Rumble tournaments?

Somebody wants to talk to the Blind Bandit.

She snuck out the back door, listening and feeling....

And grinned. “Hey, Uncle.”

“Good afternoon, Toph.”

She sensed Iroh’s polite bow in the shift of his weight, and stepped into the cool of shadows beside him. “Should I even ask how you got in here, or just chalk it up to you being a sneaky old dragon?”

Iroh chuckled. “It’s a very long story, I’m afraid. And one I would prefer not to tell here, where the Dai Li are watching. Though I do not think they can see us, here. And Amaya is likely distracting enough, speaking to Katara and Sokka of her tribe and theirs, that we should have some time to talk.”

Toph raised a brow. “You know the lady inside?”

“She is a very good friend.”

A lot more than that, from the joy and good humor seeping past the worry in his stance. *All right, Uncle!* “So... you want to talk to me,” Toph realized. “And you want to do it without them,” she jerked a thumb back toward the house, “because they know where *you* are, your nephew’s not far, and Katara’s still ticked off he tied her to a tree.”

“Not the most comfortable of captivities,” Iroh allowed. “He could have been far more gentle, true. But it kept her under our eyes, in clear sight. Which prevented the pirates from doing... many things.”

“The pirates who were working for Zuko?” Toph said pointedly.

“The pirates who had allied with my nephew to win back the waterbending scroll Katara stole from them,” Iroh answered dryly. “Very few steal from pirates and live to tell of it. Those who do,

especially young women, often wish they had not.”

“...Sugar Queen kind of left out that part.” Toph frowned. She’d known Katara hadn’t told her everything, but stealing? And Iroh *wasn’t* lying. “Okay. I’m listening.”

“My nephew and I know where Appa may be found. But we need an earthbender’s assistance.”

“And you want my help?” Toph crossed her arms. “Aren’t you two trying to *catch* Aang?”

“I would prefer not to,” Iroh said plainly. “The world has been out of balance long enough. But my nephew...” He sighed. “My nephew is making a difficult decision. I cannot be certain what he will choose to do. But I think, if he were offered help where he expects none, and words of good sense from an ally of Aang’s who does *not* hate him...”

Hope, she could feel in that upright stance. Desperate worry; probably for Zuko. Some controlled fear even now, for her and the people inside. Put that together with what he’d said about pirates- “We’re in trouble, huh?” Toph blurted out.

“Grave danger, indeed,” Iroh nodded. “Enough that I believe my nephew would risk his life to protect you, if he were forced to. And we *would* be risking our lives. If the Dai Li learned there were folk of the Fire Nation in Ba Sing Se... it would not be well.”

Not just for you, Toph thought, remembering a laughing Guard and happy children. “Okay, you talked me into it.” She held up a hand before he could respond. “Into hearing him out, anyway. I don’t like what he has to say, I’m leaving. And if *either* of you go after Aang, the Blind Bandit is going to *rock*. Get me?”

“Very clearly.” Amusement and respect, shimmering through the earth and his voice.

“Good,” Toph nodded. “Just let me tell them something... huh.” Yeah, that’d work. Aang wasn’t exactly fond of hunting up his own lessons. “I’ll tell them I’m going to see Luli again. Aang just doesn’t get jade-”

“Luli, Huojin’s wife?” Iroh interrupted.

“You know her?”

“I do,” Iroh nodded. “Though they do not know my name. And my nephew, they know only as Lee.” He paused, thinking. “I would be quite willing to meet you there, where we both have a friend. And where the presence of a Guard means no one will be... impulsive.”

Neutral ground. He is serious. “And it’ll be easier to slip by Dai Li if we don’t show up together,” Toph agreed. And grinned. “Well? Get moving! I want to hear what Sparky has to say for himself.”

“Sparky? Indeed.” Chuckling, Iroh slipped quietly away.

Okay. Here we go. Toph headed back inside, and drew a breath. “Guys-”

There was a rapping at the door, and Aang ran for it. “Maybe this is it!” He opened the door, and blinked. “Joo Dee?”

Amaya stepped back, out of what Toph realized must be line of sight.

“Hello, Aang and Katara and Sokka and Toph,” Joo Dee said with that eerie cheer.

“What happened to you?” Sokka asked, crowding forward with Katara. “Did the Dai Li throw you

in jail?"

"What, jail?" Joo Dee said dismissively. "Of course not. The Dai Li are the protectors of our cultural heritage."

Scary thing was, she seemed to believe that. "But you disappeared at the Earth King's party," Toph said, crowding around with the others. If Amaya didn't want to be seen, there was probably a good reason.

"Oh, I simply took a short vacation to Lake Laogai, out in the country," Joo Dee said cheerfully. "It was quite relaxing."

From the shift of his feet, Sokka didn't buy that. Which made Toph wish all over again he wasn't stuck on Suki. Sokka wasn't half bad.

"But then they replaced you with some other woman who also said her name was Joo Dee," Katara objected.

"I'm Joo Dee."

Clue, Katara, Toph wanted to yell. Something's wrong here!

"Why are you here?" Aang asked.

Paper rustled as Joo Dee pulled something out. "Dropping flyers and putting up posters isn't permitted within the city. Not without proper clearance."

Of course it wasn't. Sheesh. Why were they here in the city again?

Because Aang can't live without Appa. Almost literally, seems like.

"We can't wait around to get permission for everything," Sokka objected.

Ah! At last, he gets it! Toph almost threw up her hands and cheered.

"You are absolutely forbidden by the rules of the city to continue putting up posters."

...Okay, that was freaky. Nobody should sound that cheerful stomping somebody's plans- uh-oh. That tensing of Aang's feet was really not good-

"We don't care about the rules, and we're not asking permission!" Aang yelled.

Toph smirked. Now, why couldn't she get some of that when he was training?

"We're finding Appa on our own," Aang went on, backing the startled woman out the door, "and *you* should just stay out of our way!" He slammed the door, Joo Dee on the other side.

"That might come back to bite us in the blubber," Sokka said thoughtfully.

"More than you know," Amaya spoke up. "She'll be reporting this to the Dai Li. The system is fairly regimented, so it may not be heard for some hours... but a report from this Joo Dee will have priority, given she's been assigned to the Avatar's party."

"This Joo Dee?" Katara pounced. "You make it sound like there's... more than one."

"There are hundreds."

Uncle's right, Toph thought, chilled. *We are in trouble.*

"That can't be right," Aang objected, still fuming. "I mean, two women with the same name, sure. But hundreds?"

"Lee was right," Amaya muttered under her breath, too quiet for any but Toph's sharp ears to catch. "You are naïve." She rocked back on her heels a little, and Toph felt a cold anger shiver through the floor. "You're a healer, Katara. Didn't you ever try to treat them?"

"Treat what?" Katara shrugged. "Joo Dee - whoever she is - they're weird. They're not hurt."

"...Yugoda should have covered mental trauma in your second week of training."

"Yeah, well," Sokka shrugged, "Katara really trained with that old sea-prune Pakku-"

"It was awesome!" Some of the frustration washed out of Aang's stance, and he bounced, grinning. "He said he wouldn't teach her, and she cracked the audience chamber floor, and threw razor-disks of ice at him, and shoved off his water-"

"You're not a trained healer." Amaya's words knifed across Aang's exuberance. "You have Master Pakku's betrothal necklace. I thought for certain you must be trained. I hoped you knew, and were only biding your time until you could find a way to escape. Not that most of us have a chance to escape Long Feng's reach...." She breathed out a chill wisp, anger and sorrow warring in her stance.

"My necklace is from my mother," Katara said angrily. "Gran-Gran Kanna brought it with her. And I am trained!"

"She really is," Aang insisted, hands out to smooth things over. "She's my waterbending master."

"And I thought Lee lost his temper too easily," Amaya said, half to herself. Shook her head. "I can't stay. The Dai Li give me some leeway, because my healing is useful to them. But I dare not presume on their goodwill." A breath. "Do not let the Dai Li know you're not fully trained. It's probably all that has kept Long Feng from taking one of you and... damaging your minds. You're not Fire Nation. You wouldn't have the strength to resist, even long enough to be rescued."

"How can you say they're better than us?" Katara gasped. "Don't you know what they've done? What they tried to do? They tried to kill the Moon!"

Sokka shifted, feeling for his boomerang, and Toph grimaced. *That's it. Nobody's going to listen now.*

From Amaya's soft sigh, she could see that without earthbending. "I said their *minds* were stronger. More resistant to what Long Feng can do. To a point. They'll break - but they will not bend." She drew herself up, and Toph could feel her simmering anger as she pointed toward Aang. "If you refuse to understand that, Avatar - if you refuse to learn why, and where they have gained such strength - then you will never learn firebending. And the world will remain out of balance, and all of us will suffer."

"No, it won't!" Aang insisted. "I'll defeat the Fire Lord, and the war will be *over*. And I'm never going to learn firebending!" Toph felt his glance at Katara in the catch of his breath. "I'm never going to hurt someone I - care about, again."

"Then there's nothing more I can do," Amaya said simply. "I wish you luck. And I hope you escape."

“That’s it?” Sokka sputtered. “You’re Water Tribe! You know the Dai Li are bad guys. Help us out!”

“I am Water Tribe.” Almost to the door, Amaya’s voice was iron. “I am the last of the Water Tribe within these walls. Save for you, and my apprentice, Lee.”

Sparky is her apprentice? Toph bit back a whistle. *And he’s letting her call him Water Tribe?*

“Two weeks ago, there were almost two score of us, benders and not,” Amaya went on, grief and pain seeping into the floor around her. “They’re all dead now. Because of the war. Because the spirits are restless. Because one malicious kamuïy followed a trail of blood into Ba Sing Se, and *you-*” she took one long step toward Aang, who shrank back “-you sensed *nothing*.”

“I- I didn’t know,” Aang stammered. “I didn’t- why didn’t somebody tell me?”

“Because there is no war in Ba Sing Se,” Amaya said darkly. “Long Feng wants you kept quiet. Contained. Until he can find a way to *use* you, the way he does everyone.”

She’s guessing, Toph judged. *But she’s pretty sure.*

“And you’re the Avatar. You’re supposed to sense when the spirits are angry.” Pain rang through Amaya’s voice. “The Dai Li are only human. Gifted benders, but human. Still, they tracked it. They found it. They stopped it. Some of them *died* stopping it. I owe them my *life*.” She focused on Sokka. “Call them evil, if you will. But for a century the Avatar abandoned this world, and they have been all that stood between Ba Sing Se and destruction.” She shook her head. “I’m going home now. I hope you find your bison. And leave.”

The door closed like a tomb.

“And I thought the Joo Dees were weird,” Katara said uneasily.

“She was telling the truth,” Toph spoke up. “She was angry, and scared, but it was real.” Which the Joo Dees weren’t. They didn’t lie - but they didn’t exactly *feel* when they said stuff. Not like regular people did.

“But she can’t be!” Aang protested. “I would have known! I’m the Avatar!”

“Okay,” Toph shrugged. “So how does this spirit-sensy thing of yours work again?”

“Umm....”

“I hate to admit it, but Amaya could be right,” Sokka said reluctantly. “I’m not saying she is!” he added hastily at Aang’s wounded twitch. “But you were right there at the pond, in the Spirit Oasis, and you didn’t know what the fish were until after you went poof and left your body where Zuko could catch it.”

“We got you back,” Katara said grimly. “But Yue....”

“Yeah. I’ll never forgive Prince Ponytail for that, either.” Sokka blew out a breath. “Thing is, Aang, we don’t *know*. And I’m kind of getting a bad feeling about how much we don’t know about this place.”

“So you want us to go along with Joo Dee?” Aang demanded. “Just stay put, while Appa’s out there?”

“I didn’t say that-”

“Good! Because from now on, we do whatever it takes to find Appa.”

“Yeah!” Toph cheered, feeling his glare in her feet. *Finally, some backbone! Keep it up, and we can get somewhere.* “So what are we going to do? Bury the Dai Li? Storm the palace? Kidnap the Earth King?” Hey, if they were going to break rules, why not go all the way?

“...I kind of thought we’d put up the posters,” Aang admitted.

Forehead, meet palm. Repeat.

She felt like doing it all over again as Sokka, Aang, and Katara moved through the city, plastering up posters. “We’ll split up to cover more area,” Sokka said, satisfied. “Toph. I guess you should just come with me.”

“Better idea, Snoozles,” Toph said peevishly. “I’m going to find Luli again. There’s something I want to ask her, and if we do find Appa? I’m not sticking around long enough to get another chance.”

Ditched ‘em. Finally.

Which meant she could think, as she made her way through busy streets. And wince. *This could be a bad idea.*

Well, maybe. Uncle seemed to be a pretty good guy. And everything Toph had heard about the Dragon of the West said he was one of the most honorable firebenders out there. If he said they wanted to talk, she believed him.

Zuko’s honor-bound to catch Aang. This could still be a trap.

Except the exiled prince might be a lot of things, but he wasn’t *stupid*. He’d let them take off back at the ghost town, so he could look after Uncle and beat feet before Azula came back. And here he was in the very heart of the Earth Kingdom, trying to stay out of sight as a waterbending healer’s apprentice.

And how Sparky’s pulling that off, I really want to know!

If he’d been smart enough to keep from jumping Aang then, honor or no honor, he’d be smart enough to play fair now. At least while they talked. After, she wouldn’t bet on... but then she’d *know* where he was.

And if the rest of the guys aren’t there to blame Yue dying on him, we might really be able to talk.

Why Sokka pinned Princess Yue’s death on Zuko, Toph still couldn’t figure out. From what they’d said, Zhao had grabbed the Moon after they’d gotten back from Zuko’s kidnap attempt. Sparky himself had been out cold and tied up in Appa’s saddle, unable to tilt the fight either way. And Uncle had tried to *stop* Zhao.

General Iroh used to be the crown prince, too. And he’s Zuko’s uncle. Katara said he said everybody needs the Moon, even the Fire Nation. If he fought for the Moon - what makes them think Zuko wouldn’t have?

Oh, yeah, right. Fire Nation bad, Earth Kingdom and Water Tribe good. Sheesh.

She'd *told* them. Maybe she hadn't found the right words. Maybe she didn't know as much about the Water Tribes as she thought, and Zuko had somehow given them some kind of dire insult that could *never* be forgiven. Whatever it was, they didn't seem to want to hear that - based on everything Toph knew - Zuko's *only* interest was Aang. Not the Water Tribes. Not the Earth Kingdom. The Avatar. That was it.

Heck, even Suki'd admitted that Zuko left Kyoshi Island after Aang took off. Left, and didn't come back.

He deserves a chance for someone to hear him out. Toph smirked, and cracked her knuckles. *And if that doesn't work... if Sweetness can take him, so can I.*

Breezing through the carver's shop, Toph stepped into the garden, and headed for voices.

"How about the Jasmine Dragon?" Iroh said heartily. "It's dramatic, poetic, has a nice ring to it."

"How can you think about teashop names at a time like this?" Zuko groaned.

"Who knows? We might get lucky. The Tea Weevil! No, that's stupid...."

"Toph," Zuko said flatly, rising.

"A good name, yes, but already taken-"

"He means Toph's here," Huojin said, amused. "Afternoon, Miss Bei Fong. You know these two walking disaster areas?"

"Huojin!" Zuko protested.

"We met once," Iroh smiled. "Briefly."

"Yeah, but it was the kind of meeting you never forget," Toph grinned. Cocked her head, listening to Zuko move across the garden to give her a civil nod. "Huh. You really are Amaya's apprentice."

"...What?"

"Your stance is different." Still strong, still aggressive - but lighter, more fluid. Less straight-in, and more of a hint of circling that would deflect away a strike before it could ever land.

Less dillo-lion, and more dragon.

"But I didn't come to talk bending," Toph said bluntly, sitting down across from them. "I know your honor means you've got to catch Aang for the Fire Lord-"

"*What?*" Huojin burst out.

"Patience, if you will," Iroh said graciously, seating himself. Zuko settled down by him, still tense. "We are here to discuss matters amicably, and hopefully avoid violence."

"Thank the spirits Luli's taking the kids to Meixiang's tonight," Huojin muttered, reluctantly sitting.

"Wise," Iroh murmured. "You may need an alibi."

"...Oh, I really didn't need to hear that...."

"I know the terms are you've got to catch him," Toph forged on. "And I know *you* know you're not getting him unless you go through me first. So. What have we got to talk about?"

"Lee, she's just a kid," Huojin started.

"Hey!" Toph objected.

"She's a master earthbender, and an honorable opponent," Zuko said plainly. "We're negotiating a temporary alliance. She's got every right to be blunt."

"Still not hearing any reason we should work together." Toph crossed her arms. "Knowing where Appa is isn't enough. If you can find him, we can."

"But not in time," Zuko said levelly. "You need to get out of Ba Sing Se. You need to get out *now*."

"That's what Amaya said," Toph nodded. Paying careful attention to Iroh's stillness. He was waiting. *Hoping*. "You want to tell me why?"

"Did your friends tell you what happened at the North Pole?"

"Crazy spirits, Fire Navy go squish?" Toph said. *Knowing* she was pushing it. *If Sparky's going to fly off the handle, I need to know now.*

Zuko tensed, but forced himself to stay still. "The people in charge here are trying to make that happen again."

Toph froze. "No. No way, Aang *hates* what happened there." She'd heard plenty about that, and about General Fong's pushing Aang into the kind of Avatar freak-out that had blasted sandbenders halfway across the Si Wong desert. And felt a lot more in what Sokka and Katara *didn't* say about the general they'd met on the Wall. Maybe glowing it up like that *could* take out the Fire Nation army, but.... "He doesn't want to do stuff like that again! Not *ever*."

"That makes two of us," Zuko said grimly. "That's why I'm going to help you."

Oh. Toph tried not to react. *Oh, wow. This is big.*

"Nephew?" Iroh asked carefully.

Yeah, Toph thought. *Get him to spell it out. I think I know what he's getting at, but whoa....*

"Honor doesn't demand suicide," Zuko said bitterly. Toph could feel his hands clenching on cloth in the way the ground vibrated under him. "I can't capture the Avatar in Ba Sing Se. Not without exposing myself as a firebender. If I do that...." He took a shaky breath. "If I do that, I'm dead. And not just me. The Dai Li will go after anyone who's helped me. Anyone they even suspect might know what I am. Because *there is no war in Ba Sing Se*." Another breath; another clench of muscle and bone. "If I try to capture the Avatar here, I'll die. And I'll die a *failure*."

"I fear that is so," Iroh said quietly. "You would need tremendous luck to succeed, and survive. And luck... does not favor you."

"It never has," Zuko muttered. Bent his head, and sighed. "If I can't serve my people by capturing the Avatar - then the best thing I can do is keep something like the North Pole from happening again." He looked straight at her. "Appa's under Lake Laogai. Will you help us get him out?"

“Should I even be listening to this?” Huojin muttered.

“Well, I hear the Dai Li deny the bison is even there,” Iroh said mildly. “And he does belong with the Avatar. Surely, what they do not admit they have, cannot be stolen from them?”

“There’s something screwy in your logic. I just know it.” Huojin stood, scratching his head. “Miss? Are you going to be all right with these two would-be lawbreakers, or do I have to hang around and incriminate myself?”

“I think I’ll be okay,” Toph said, surprised. “I think I’ll be fine.” She *listened* to Zuko, tracking every shift of breath and posture. “You really mean it. You’re going to help. No strings.”

“One string,” Zuko corrected, taking out a rustle of paper. “This is for Sokka. It’s... some of the stuff I know about the city. Maybe it’ll help him make up his mind to get *out* of here.”

Toph took the letter, folding it inside her belt. “If he knows it’s from you, he’s not going to listen.”

Zuko snorted. “I didn’t sign it.”

“Not bad,” Toph approved. “Though I’m guessing there’s one more string.” She paused, deliberately. “You want me to come with you alone. Without the guys.”

“You know them better than we,” Iroh said plainly. “Would they accept our aid? Or instead, reveal us for what we are, and doom us all?”

“Not sure I want to find out,” Toph admitted. “Okay, I’m in. What’s the plan?”

Huojin cleared his throat, loudly. “Leaving. Now.”

“Wait,” Zuko said; a quiet, lonely plea. “Toph... I know they wouldn’t believe me.” He swallowed. “Why do you?”

“Because you never lied to me,” Toph said bluntly. “I know who you are, and who Uncle is. I know you have honor, no matter what the Fire Nation thinks. If you didn’t, you never would have warned us about your crazy sister.” She had to look away, even if she couldn’t see. “The Bei Fongs deal with Fire Nation merchants. You don’t talk about fights inside the clan. Not to outsiders. They’re not worth it. But you? You *owed* Katara. And you paid up.” She turned back to him. “You treated her like she had honor. Even if she was an outsider. Even if she was *Water Tribe*.” The earthbender held out a hand. “Told you. I’m in.”

The fingers that gripped hers were warm, and strong, and barely trembling with relief. “Agreed.”

Chapter End Notes

The bit between Zuko and Meixiang is in part based on the scene where Roku is revealed as the next Avatar, and everybody hits the ground; even the prince kneeling. Proper signals of dominance and submission are *very important* to large, heavily-armed predators.

It’s also in part based on what we see from Fang, Ran, and Sho. Dragons communicate through (apparent) telepathic images, and movement. Words, they’re not so good at.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

At this point, changes from canon plot start snowballing. Hang onto your seats, it's gonna be a bumpy ride....

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Where’s Toph?” Katara wondered.

Sokka frowned, ostentatiously looking around and down for an aggravated earthbender. No Toph.

Which was just what he’d expected. *Don’t make me have to explain, Toph. Please? Katara’s scary when she gets mad....*

“She said she was going to see that jade-carver, Luli,” Aang said, looking everywhere at once as they walked back through poster-strewn streets. “Wish I knew why. How often am I going to have to bend jade? It’s not like it comes in pieces big enough to throw at somebody.”

“Hey, your old friend Bumi learned to bend with his *face*,” Sokka pointed out. “I think having rocks in your head makes you just a *little* bit crazy.”

“Toph’s stubborn, and she likes to pretend she doesn’t have any manners, but she’s not crazy,” Katara argued. “She knows how worried we were the last time she walked off. She wouldn’t stay out this long without a reason.” His sister dropped her voice. “And I think we’re being followed.”

“We are,” Sokka said practically, carefully *not* looking up to those shadows on the rooftops. *Aw, spirits. I’m going to have to tell them.* “I’m hoping that’s a good thing.”

“Um... how is us being followed a good thing?” Aang said, confused.

“Because if we’re lucky, they’re *not* following Toph.” At the airbender’s raised brow, Sokka sighed, and nodded at the crowds carefully parting around them, wherever they walked. “Look. Haven’t you noticed nobody’s talking to us? Not about anything important. I’m guessing they know we’re in trouble, and they don’t want to end up in the stewpot with us.”

“Like Amaya,” Katara growled.

“Not exactly,” Sokka admitted. “Katara, think. Don’t you guys say waterbending is about deflecting, and redirecting your enemy’s attack?” Like Suki with her war-fans; oh, he *missed* her.

“Yeah,” Aang nodded, glancing up at the roofs. “So?”

Sokka tried not to whack himself in the forehead. Subtle, Aang was *not*. “So, why would a *waterbender* come straight in and say she couldn’t help us? And why would Toph, who loves to listen in on everyone and who’s *always* nosy about places she’s never been, just disappear while we’re talking to somebody from the Northern Tribe?” Granted, it’d taken him these last few hours to figure all of it out, but Katara didn’t have to know that.

“Maybe she just, well... kind of got bored?” Aang said sheepishly.

“You weren’t bored when we were talking to Bato,” Katara objected.

“Actually? I kind of was.”

“Toph doesn’t bore that easily,” Sokka broke in, before his sister could get huffy. “If she’s not with us, she’s after something important.”

“Finding flaws in rock,” Aang sighed.

“No. Appa.”

“*What?*”

“Keep your voice down!” Sokka hissed. “You want to blow Toph’s plan?”

“What plan?” Katara said pointedly.

Sokka sighed, hoping their watchers didn’t have Toph’s ears. “Amaya came to talk because we were Water Tribe, right? Why didn’t she bring Lee?”

“Because she doesn’t want to help,” Katara bit out.

“I think she *did*,” Sokka eyed both of them. “I think maybe Amaya was a distraction for the Dai Li. Did you see how Toph was when she did come back? Like she was waiting for something. Maybe, getting a chance to split up?” He frowned. “I think Lee *was* there. And Toph talked to him.”

“And he knew where Appa was?” Aang pounced. But thankfully, kept his voice down. “Why wouldn’t she tell us?”

Sokka winced. “She *might* think you still blame her for losing Appa in the first place. You were pretty blunt about that.”

“He was angry,” Katara defended Aang. “Anybody would have been. Toph knows he didn’t mean it.”

“I’m just saying, he never said he was sorry,” Sokka shrugged. “And you know how Toph is about pulling her own weight.”

“But this is different!” Aang insisted. “If she knows where Appa is, we’ve got to be there!”

“Aang’s right,” Katara nodded. “Toph’s a little overconfident sometimes-”

The little menace could trash Earth Rumble benders with flicks of her fingers, and take out a charging saber-moose lion. Overconfident was *not* the word Sokka would use.

“-She could need our help,” Katara finished. “Especially if she’s with Lee. Who in the Water Tribe names their kid *Lee*?”

Okay, that was a good point. “But that could wreck Toph’s plan!” Sokka argued. “If the Dai Li are keeping an eye on us-”

“Appa’s more important than Toph’s plan,” Aang said impatiently. “Let’s go find Luli.”

“So... the Avatar didn’t intend to destroy the fleet?”

Dark cloak over her robes, mask ready to go on at Zuko's signal, Toph considered the exiled prince's words very carefully. Half of an Earth Rumble wasn't bending at all, really; it was getting inside your opponent's head, so you knew how he'd move, how he'd flinch, and what would get the crowd pumped up and roaring.

He trusts me, a little, Toph thought, reading his footsteps as they made their way down farm roads toward the distant lake. A train would have been way faster, but she didn't need Zuko to tell her those earthbenders probably reported to the Dai Li too.

He's going to help. This time. But he's not just any firebender. He's Prince Zuko.

Aang had been raised by monks, who seemed to spend a lot of time contemplating the universe and otherwise answered to a council of elders if they didn't shave often enough. Katara and Sokka had grown up in a small village, where their dad was responsible for, oh, maybe a few hundred people. Zuko? He'd been raised to someday take over the whole Fire Nation.

Toph might not do maps, but she was a merchant's daughter. And she could *feel* how big Ba Sing Se was. Huge. Mind-numbingly huge. A quarter of a *continent* big.

And General Iroh had once held the *entire city* under siege.

The number of soldiers that must have taken made her head hurt. The number of people who had to be behind those soldiers, maintaining supplies of food, steel, new recruits... *ow*.

And Zuko had been taught to be responsible for *all* of them.

From what Katara and Sokka had said about the North Pole, Aang had wiped out *years* of shipbuilding. And who knew how much time and experience in the sailors and the marines *on* those ships. In *one night*.

Uh-uh. Zuko's question wasn't *nearly* as simple as it sounded.

"He wanted to stop the fleet," Toph said bluntly. "I think he'd have been happy if they just turned around and went away."

"They couldn't do that. Not under Admiral Zhao's orders."

"So, what?" Toph asked dryly. "Aang should have just grabbed a waterbending master and run away?"

"It would have been the smart thing to do," Zuko shot back. "There are islands. There are miles of coastline in the north, near the mountains. He could have trained on the coast, kept somebody on lookout, and just retreated behind the mountains any time Fire Nation forces approached. Move there out of sight - it'd be *easy* on Appa - and he could just fly back over to the coast when he was clear."

Oh. Now she felt like an idiot. *Why didn't Sokka think of that?*

"But that probably wouldn't have stopped the invasion," Zuko admitted reluctantly. "Zhao had... too much influence by then. Came close to catching the Avatar too many times. *Did* catch him, once. Why the hell was he after frozen frogs in range of Pohuai Stronghold, the idiot...."

"Frozen frogs?" Toph asked, curious. Sokka had complained about frogs a few weeks back, something about warts on his tongue. To absolutely no sympathy from Katara.

“...Nothing.”

Definitely wasn't nothing. But Zuko had tensed up in a way that said she'd have more luck asking with hot knives and bamboo slivers.

“Zhao had influence, and he had a plan. The Fire Lord backed him. If the Avatar hadn't headed into Water Tribe territory, maybe... but he did.” Zuko blew out a hot breath. “Nothing would have stopped the invasion then.”

“You sound like you think it was a bad idea,” Toph said, trying for casual.

“Well, it didn't work, did it?” The acid in Zuko's voice could have stripped limestone down to chalky water.

“You got in,” Toph pointed out.

“Zhao didn't even know I was there,” Zuko snorted. “*He* thought I was dead.”

Say what? But Toph let that interesting fact slide, feeling the tension seeping out of Zuko's stride. *Maybe he just needs somebody to listen.* “Okay, Sparky. How would *you* have pried Aang out of all that ice?”

“With Zhao's resources? I wouldn't have used a whole fleet,” Zuko said thoughtfully. “A few ships, to carry the people I needed... you've met Ty Lee.”

“Uh, yeah,” Toph said, startled. “How'd you know that?”

“My sister was chasing you,” Zuko said dryly. “I found some of the camps she chased you out of. Only one thing makes master benders retreat that fast.”

Toph gulped. “There are more people like her?”

“A lot more. They're not supposed to leave the Fire Nation in wartime, but Azula's never let little things like laws stop her....” He tapped fingers against his thigh, thinking. “Stealth teams. Sneak past the lookouts; they're looking for metal, red, and black, not small boats and people dressed like snow. They're not trained lookouts anyway. The Water Tribes don't have an organized military. More of a militia. They're trained warriors, they're good individually, but their command and control structure *sucks*. There are exceptions, like Chief Hakoda, but most of their leaders don't have a grasp on long-term strategy. They don't fight to defend their nation; they fight because you're an outsider, and you're there. The Northern Tribe is used to relying on their waterbenders and the ice. They hadn't suffered a determined assault in eighty-five years, which meant all their trained warriors had no one to fight but each other. And believe me, they did. Hereditary house territories and political alliances with upper-class families, that's where their weapons and bending training got focused. And *that* means when they put lookouts on the walls, those people *weren't* watching the Fire Nation. They were watching their *enemies*, the ones they'd have to live with after we were gone. And they assumed we *would* be gone - the last invasion didn't work, and this time they had the *Avatar* on their side.” Zuko's bitter smile seared through the ground. “And because they couldn't forget about each other and focus on us, they huddled in allied groups. Which left gaps in the lookout coverage.” He shrugged. “Make it in through the gaps, find the Avatar, *extract* him, and retreat. Let the Water Tribe think the Avatar's abandoned them. *Again*. That would break their morale right there. You wouldn't *need* to fight.”

“Oh,” Toph said, voice small. Swallowed hard. *Well, you asked.*

And when you felt past the scary shiver of realizing Zuko had *thought* about this... he'd told her

the truth. Again. Toph frowned. “How long is it going to take us to get to this lake?”

“A while yet. Why?”

“You know I could feel anybody sneaking up on us way before we had to hide,” Toph said confidently.

“Good,” Zuko said warily. “So?”

“So, tell me what’s happened since you started chasing Aang,” Toph demanded. “These guys only mention things they think I need to know, and they leave all kinds of good stuff out! Katara *stole* a waterbending scroll?”

“Ah, yeah...?”

“She never told me that part! I had to hear it from Uncle.” Toph bounced on her heels. “Tell me what *you* saw. How’d this whole mess get started?”

Tell me how I can get you on our side. Twinkletoes is going to need a firebending master, like it or not....

And if your sister ever wised up and gave you what you need to catch Aang, we’d be in big trouble.

Zuko swallowed, and drew a breath. “A hundred years ago, a ship’s log recorded sighting a bison heading toward the South Pole....”

“Why would Healer Amaya visit the Avatar?”

Reading by lantern-light - handy as glowing crystals were, his eyes hated them - Shirong started. Glanced up at Quan, curious. “Nothing I can think of-”

No. He wouldn’t.

“But?” Quan said pointedly.

“One of the Avatar’s companions is a waterbender,” Shirong said practically. “Amaya might want to discuss bending.” All the while, his mind raced. *Oh, spirits. Lee, tell me you didn’t.* “What’s going on?”

“We should advise her not to do that again soon.” Quan frowned. “Long Feng is... disturbed. The Avatar’s Joo Dee has had to be removed from duty. Again. Currently the children are chasing their posters through the city, which is relatively harmless... but we’ve lost track of the earthbender.”

Oma and Shu. He did.

Only long practice let Shirong keep his face neutral and interested. Inside he was torn between gut-wrenching terror and utter delight at Lee’s sheer nerve.

He needed an earthbender to get to the bison. He found one. Oh, my.... “I seem to recall that the Blind Bandit’s remarkably apt to vanish when she wants to,” Shirong observed. “But she always shows up again. Usually with a new rock sample to bounce off her companions’ heads.”

“True,” Quan acknowledged. “Well. At least you’ll get a good night’s sleep.”

“Extra guard shifts?” Shirong raised a brow.

“Just a precaution.” Quan regarded him levelly, just a fraction of an instant too long-

Smiled, and saw himself out. “Have a good night.”

Shirong kept an answering smile on his face as Quan’s footsteps retreated, feeling his heart try to freeze in his chest. *Oma and Shu. They know.*

No. They couldn’t know. They might suspect something could be amiss, Lee hadn’t exactly looked perfectly calm and contained heading out with Amaya, but they couldn’t know. Or he’d be answering to Long Feng *personally*.

And not of my own will.

Spirits, no. I’d rather die.

Startling thought. Living was living, after all. He’d served Long Feng for years, darkening his soul as every Dai Li had to. Did it matter if he lost one more shred of himself?

Yes. It does. I won’t be used. I won’t betray my city to the whims of people who can’t see beyond the Avatar’s power to the heart of a twelve-year-old boy!

Shirong sucked in a breath, shaken by his own certainty. It burned, that sureness; warming and painful at once.

I won’t be used. And I won’t betray Lee.

Which meant he had to do the hardest thing of all. Nothing.

He broke into Pohuai Stronghold. He got into the North Pole. He can do this.

I hope.

But the only way Lee would stand a chance was if Quan wasn’t *sure*. If Shirong moved to help, if he moved at all - Quan would be sure.

There’s nothing I can do.

No. Not quite true. There was one thing. And given the close shave he’d had with the haima-jiao, it wouldn’t even look suspicious. Much.

Lighting incense, Shirong stuck the smoking sticks in a bowl of rice before the mini-shrine every Dai Li kept in his quarters, and clapped his hands to pray.

Oma and Shu, Tui and La... Agni, if you’ll hear one who’s cursed your people so thoroughly most of his life.... One of your children really needs your help.

I know he’s a crazy, mixed-up kid. I know you’re all probably staring at him cross-eyed, trying to figure out what to do with a Fire Nation waterbender - with a firebender uncle! - who can’t turn around without tripping over a kamuiy. But he’s trying to do the right thing. He’s trying to help that other poor kid you stuck with the fate of the world. That’s got to count for something.

I know I don’t deserve any favors. I’m Dai Li. I did what I had to do. But... help him. Please.

Well. That was it. Shirong sighed, and lowered his hands-

For one heartbeat, the shrine glowed gold.

“Sparky?”

“Yes?” Zuko answered, half-listening as he scanned the dark lake for any sign of a boat. Toph could pick up anything moving on the ground, but they’d already had one near miss with a courier dead asleep on a canny old ostrich-horse standing in the middle of the road. Which had led to a tense, whispered explanation of how seeing with earthbending worked, and his realization that to Toph, the lake was one big black hole.

“I’m impressed.” Said with the kind of finality that implied Toph just didn’t *do* impressed, most of the time.

“Why?” Zuko looked at her, puzzled. “You know what my uncle did as a general. If the Fire Lord commands, you obey.”

“And...?” Toph prodded.

Zuko rolled his eyes. “You know, that’s really annoying.” Useful, though. What he wouldn’t give for a living lie detector to handle the court weasel-snakes.

Would have given, Zuko reminded himself. *At least you should be able to avoid most of them, now.* Not entirely, the plan might bring them in contact with who knew what... but they definitely wouldn’t be around on a daily basis.

“Deal with it,” Toph said cheerfully. “Come on. We both know you’re not in this just to follow orders.”

Can I trust her?

Does it really matter?

Zuko sighed. “Do you want *Azula* in charge of the Fire Nation?” He shivered at the thought. No doubt Toph felt it. He just didn’t care.

The earthbender let out what would have been a whistle, if they hadn’t been worried about getting caught. “Yeah. Yeah, that’d make me... pretty determined. If it was me.” She smirked, and stomped; a lump of shaped rock rose to the surface, round door shedding water. “Guess that just leaves one more question. How can you fake it so well everybody in the city thinks you’re a waterbender?”

Zuko smirked back, and raised his hands, palms together. “Watch your rocks.” A breath, and he swept his hands apart and *down*.

Water sheeted off stone, slipping back into the lake like a silken curtain. Toph’s jaw dropped.

“We don’t want to leave wet footprints,” Zuko said bluntly. “I’m not going to be able to do that inside. The Dai Li keep track of every bender in the city. If I use water, the mask won’t matter.” He hesitated. “Don’t tell them. Please.”

“Okay,” Toph nodded, milky eyes still wide. “Nobody’d believe it anyway... how?”

“I drowned on dry land.” Zuko shrugged, trying not to let it matter. “If... what I was told is right, the spirits are arguing over what should happen next. With Aang. With *everything*. Yue... she said I’d tried to bring some balance back. After that - Amaya got the water out of my lungs, and took me in.” He snorted. “Want to know what’s really scary? She and Uncle conspire on my lessons.

There's nothing in any scrolls about bending fire and water at the same time, so they get to be *creative*. I swear I've caught them giggling." And that was really too much, he shouldn't have-

"I bet." Toph's face was one wide grin. "Can I at least tell the guys Lee's Fire Nation? We're going to be leaving anyway... and I have *got* to feel the look on Sugar Queen's face!"

Surprising himself, Zuko snickered. *Wish I could see that*. "Just say we're colonials. That's the story Uncle's been using." He let out a slow breath, shutting fear and laughter away. "Ready?"

"Right behind you." Toph crooked a finger, and the cover skated aside.

Focus on the goal, Zuko reminded himself. Forget you're helping the Avatar. Remember you're saving your people.

Determined, he descended into green-lit shadows.

In a way, the frantic pounding on Huojin's door was a relief.

Dai Li wouldn't pound, they'd just appear inside. The Guard hopped over one of Daiyu's stray wooden ostrich-horses as he headed for the door. He'd been about to head out for headquarters anyway, his fellow Guards knew where he was. They probably just needed an extra, early hand. Riot, fire, fugitive in the area, something like that. All of which, no matter how dire, had to be better than Dai Li on his doorstep. *I really lucked out-*

He opened the door, and had to look down.

Skinny kid. Shaved bald. Flying lemur on his shoulder. Airbender tattoos. Oh, and two determined-looking Water Tribe teens backing him up, one carrying a mean boomerang and the girl a waterskin and a glint in blue eyes that said she knew how to use it.

...I'm going to get you for this, Lee. Somehow.

"Where's Luli?" the airbender - the *Avatar* - demanded.

"Where's Toph?" the waterbender added, voice edged with violence.

"And who's this guy Lee, anyway?" Boomerang jumped in.

"Evening to you, too," Huojin drawled. *Act like you don't see the threat, and maybe they'll get over themselves*. "You can report missing persons at Guard headquarters." *Might as well head there now*, Huojin thought, stepping into the street past them and marching off. *I want backup. Lots of backup.*

"*Report this, wait for that - everything here strangles in rules!*" The airbender's staff struck the ground, and Huojin felt a familiar tremor-

He didn't move fast enough.

Okay, Huojin thought, up to his neck in rock and trying to hold his temper to a slow simmer, *now I know why Lee's so snarly*.

The Avatar landed in front of him, gray eyes determined. "Where's Luli?"

Keep your temper, Huojin told himself, trying not to growl. *Don't escalate the situation*. "What the hell do you want with my wife?"

...Well, I tried.

“Your wife?” The Avatar blinked, and seemed to shrink a little. “Um... we just want to talk to her....”

“Rocks off,” Huojin said flatly. “Then we can talk.”

Earth rumbled back into the street.

Brushing himself off, Huojin looked at the kids and shook his head. “What is with you, anyway? Don’t you know that’s assault? On a City Guard? *Trouble* doesn’t even begin to cover it.” He eyed the oldest of the bunch, boomerang and all. “*And* you’re all out past curfew. *Toph* would know better.”

“She said she wanted to talk to Luli, and then she didn’t come back,” Boomerang stated, hands out to ease the tension. “It took us hours just to find you. We just want to know where Toph is.”

“And who Lee is,” the waterbender said darkly.

A kid with more guts than sense. “Toph was here earlier,” Huojin said plainly. “I didn’t see when she left.” Or who she’d left with. The less he knew about Lee breaking into *Dai Li headquarters*, the better.

“*Why* was she here?” Boomerang said pointedly.

So one of them had half a brain. But given he’d asked that on the street.... Huojin sighed.

The teenager slapped himself on the forehead, and gave Huojin a weak grin. “Right! To see Luli. Why else? So... where is Luli?”

“Papers,” Huojin said bluntly.

“What?”

“You’re underage, you’re out past curfew, you assaulted a Guard, and you are definitely behaving in a belligerent and disorderly fashion,” Huojin stated. “You think I’m going to tell you where my wife is when I don’t know who you are?”

“We... don’t have any papers,” the waterbender admitted. “Toph did, but....”

“We don’t need papers!” That obstinate look was back in gray eyes. “I’m the Avatar.”

Huojin lifted a brow, arched with all the skeptical disbelief of a Guard who’d heard every drunk spirit-tale under the sun. “*Sure* you are.”

Heh. This could be fun.

Well, if everything blows up in our faces, at least Sparky’s having fun, Toph thought, grinning behind her mask.

It wasn’t anything big. Other people probably wouldn’t even see a smile. But there was a lightness in Zuko’s step she’d never felt before. A fragile joy, as if all the lumps of confused prince had dropped away and left a flutter-hornet dancing in the breeze.

He’s good at this.

Which was *weird*, for a firebender, given how much of this was listening and waiting to move. Silence and speed and silence again, moving in the gaps of guards' attention. He'd even held her shoulder, one unseen moment, and demonstrated a slight adjustment to her step that softened her footfalls even further.

And while all the rest of him was silent, she could feel his heart beating like solstice morning.

Or like the tournaments, Toph realized, following close behind. *This is the real opponent. The good one. The one that's going to take everything you've got, and you still might lose.*

But if you pull it off... man, you win it all.

On top of that, he was glad she was there. Her. Specifically. She'd felt tension seeping out of him as they'd walked, and she'd proved she was a better lookout at night than anyone with eyes. Felt him - not tense - but ready himself to watch what might be out in the water, where she couldn't see. Felt his hesitance as he adjusted her step, and his honest delight when she silently accepted the correction and did her best to mimic him, within the limits of her bending.

Zuko was glad she was there. That was... whoa.

So stay on your toes, Toph told herself, as they ghosted down yet another corridor of mostly-empty prison cells. *Don't screw this up*. Her eyes widened, and she stopped, hand out close enough to feel the heat radiating from Zuko's shirt. "What?" she murmured.

"I don't *believe* this," Zuko breathed, peering into one cell. Wrestled with himself, and sighed. "We have to get them out. You'd better do the talking."

"Why just them?" Toph asked pointedly.

"I don't know why anybody else is here. These three, I do. Damn."

Okay, she could work with that. Zuko eased the lock open, and Toph stuck her masked head in enough to hear the differences between a young girl, a skinny guy, and a guy a little more heavily built than Zuko. "If you want out of here, follow us, and stay *quiet*."

Feet thumped the floor, startled. "I'm Jet," the more muscled teen said; voice trying for confident, but ragged at the edges. "They're Smellerbee and Longshot. Who are you?"

"You don't want to know," Toph said bluntly, aware of Zuko's silence. "Less talking, more sneaking."

Around and down, following Zuko's earth-shimmering steps. Toph felt a chamber beyond the wall, the vibrations of too-still bodies, the earth-shadow of a partly open door.

"I'm Joo Dee," a man's voice said calmly. "Welcome to Ba Sing Se."

"*I'm Joo Dee*," dozens of women said in unison. "*Welcome to Ba Sing Se.*"

"We are so lucky to have our walls to create order."

"*We are so lucky to have our walls to create order.*"

There are hundreds, Amaya had said. Toph felt chilled. And *angry*.

Some of that was smoking off her partner in crime; she could feel heat drifting through the air. She couldn't blame Sparky one bit.

I don't care what Aang thinks. The Fire Nation wants this city? They can have it.

But that wouldn't be fair to people like Luli, and Huojin, and Amaya. People just trying to get by; people who knew something was wrong with their city, but didn't have the power to fix it.

I'm not sure even Aang can fix this place.

"That - they tried to do that to *us*, they-"

Smellerbee grabbed Jet's arm, and Longshot clapped a hand over Jet's mouth, shaking his head *no*.

Oh boy. Toph's stomach headed for her ankles. We're in for it now....

"Shirong hasn't moved?" Long Feng asked coolly. Juggling a myriad interlocking plots in his mind, calculating and recalculating the moves that would need to be made to maintain control of the city and the Earth King. Calculations the Avatar was making needlessly complicated.

He's twelve. He should sit still, keep his mouth shut, and let those who know better decide what is right.

If only he dared bring the Avatar down here....

Too risky. If that blunderer General Fong is accurate, the Avatar State is triggered by extreme emotions. We can't afford to lose all we've built here.

"He's been quiet," Quan reported. "Reading. Praying." The agent met his gaze. "Sir, I admit he's acting... oddly. But we've all had bad days after spirit-injuries."

"So we have," Long Feng acknowledged. "Coming close to death... it shakes a person. But that is precisely the point. I know you're his friend, Quan-"

"It will not prevent me from carrying out my duty. Sir."

"Of course not," Long Feng said levelly. "But friendship can soften any man's judgment." He frowned darkly. "He arranged to see Amaya and Lee unwatched, and then she arranged to see the Avatar. One of whose teachers is now missing."

"Coincidence?" Quan offered.

Long Feng cast him a look askance.

Quan bowed his head. "There are no coincidences." He breathed out slowly. "Sir, Healer Amaya has been a reliable asset for years...."

"But she is now Lee's master," Long Feng stated. "And Lee... troubles me."

Reluctantly, Quan nodded. "It wasn't obvious at first... but no one with that level of weapons training should have avoided military attention. Elderly uncle as a dependant or not."

"Yet that's apparently precisely what he has done," Long Feng observed. "And the haima-jiao. I've read the reports. They are disturbing." He shook his head. "How does a half-trained bender throw off a spirit that sucked in his own master whole? A spirit that drew strength from water, and was only harmed by light and fire?"

Quan inclined his head, acknowledging the unanswered questions. "Lee is certainly suspect. But

we have no reason to believe Shirong has... strayed.”

“None yet,” Long Feng started.

Running feet, and a junior agent was panting in his doorway. “Sir! We’ve found Bei Fong!”

Or rather, Long Feng realized as he and Quan broke in on the fray, she’d found *them*.

And she wasn’t alone.

The three Yunxu questioned about the haima-jiao, Long Feng realized. Conscious, still defiant - but a minimal threat, given they were unarmed aside from a few hastily-grabbed shards of stone. Insignificant, in the face of a rampaging Toph Bei Fong. And it was indeed her, despite that ridiculous mask. No other earthbender could disintegrate stone fists without even looking, and swat Dai Li agents across the room with pillars of rock.

That’s the known danger, Long Feng thought dispassionately, waiting motionless as he sized up the form behind the Blue Spirit mask. Right height, the right build, dao... a pity he’d been right about Shirong....

The intruder slashed stone from the air, and fire lashed out to blast agents away.

A firebender!

Too many of them, Zuko thought grimly, blasting to pieces the stone glove on the back of Toph’s shirt before it could drag her away. Trying not to glance behind him, as Smellerbee and Longshot kept their leader from strangling him.

I give up. Jet’s not just an idiot. He’s insane.

A passing thought, flitting around the taut focus of working with Toph to keep them all alive and free. There were just too many Dai Li....

At least, too many for nonlethal tactics.

I don’t want to kill them. I know some of these people. All we want is to get the bison and get out. If we just had some cover....

He was moving before he could think it through, blades clicking together, free hand diving into his shirt to pull out a bag and scatter its contents in one furious toss.

Dried leaves fluttered. For one instant, he saw Long Feng’s startled look.

Burn.

The fire-wind blazed, flames whipping around to block them from the Dai Li’s view.

Benders can’t hit what they can’t see.

Except for Toph, who laughed as the missiles stopped coming and slammed up walls just beyond the fire. Cracked her knuckles, and yanked a square door open in stone. “Come on!”

He dove and rolled, Smellerbee and Longshot yanked Jet through, and Toph slammed the wall behind them.

We're being stalled, Katara thought darkly, stalking through the pre-dawn twilight toward the Wen house. At least it had *better* be the Wen house, after the time Luli's husband and his fellow guards had spent denying the Avatar right in front of their faces.

They did it on purpose. They knew who Aang was. Everybody knows!

Ooo, she would have liked to freeze them all to the floor. Especially Luli's husband. Something about him just set her *teeth* on edge.

This had better be it, or I'm freezing people solid.

"Maybe Aang should knock on the door," Sokka spoke up behind her.

"Right," Katara bit out. "Because that worked so *well* last time."

"Okay, maybe I should."

She rounded on him. "Oh, like you did any better, the way those Guards stalled us!"

"They're scared," Aang said quietly.

"That's no excuse! We're trying to help them!"

"And we want them to help us," Sokka pointed out. "They're not going to want to do that if you turn them into ice cubes." Face set, he pushed past her and knocked on the door.

A long minute passed. Katara listened hard, catching a murmur that sounded like arguing behind thick wood.

The door opened, and a well-dressed woman about as old as Toph's mother swept a green gaze over them all. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Sokka," her brother smiled, and gestured toward them. "This is my sister Katara, our friend Aang, and Momo-"

The lemur trilled, cocking his head endearingly.

"We're looking for a friend of ours, Toph Bei Fong? She said she was going to see Luli, and we hear she's here. At the Wen house? Unless we have the wrong place, and in that case I'm sorry we woke you up...."

If she hadn't been watching, Katara would never have caught the flicker of the woman's eyes toward the rooftops.

"I'm Meixiang Wen," the woman stated, standing aside from the doorway. "Luli's still asleep; the children wore her out. But I may be able to answer your questions." A slight smile touched her face. "And my daughter Jia would never forgive me if I let you get away before she's up. You're still the talk of her poetry class."

"Really?" Sokka preened.

Boys! Katara fumed. But held her peace until the door was closed behind them. "Look, I'm sure Sokka would *love* to stick around, but we need to find Toph."

"And Appa," Aang added. "Please, could you just talk to us? Toph could really be in trouble!"

Meixiang looked over them again, and sighed. “She already is.” She shook her head. “But she has help. It should be enough. And I know if you go after her, you will likely all be imprisoned. Or worse.” She didn’t give them time to gasp, green eyes fixing on startled gray. “Avatar Aang. What harm has my family ever done you, that you bring the Dai Li to our door?”

“You can’t blame Aang for that!” Katara objected.

“They’re following us,” Sokka pointed out. “She kind of has a point.” He frowned at Meixiang. “Are you going to be in trouble?”

“My husband is a professor of archaeology, a teacher of history from the time before there were Dai Li. Long before they claimed the reins of power as their own. We live in danger.” She looked at Aang again. “I told you, Toph is not here. She found someone who could help her, and she’s gone to find something you lost. I suggest you find somewhere Toph can find *you*, and wait.” She frowned. “And then I suggest you leave Ba Sing Se, and go where you stand a chance of helping our people.”

“I *have* been helping!” Aang protested. “I’m trying to save the Earth Kingdom! Why do people keep telling me to leave?”

“You....” Meixiang flung up her hands in frustration, and called upstairs. “Tingzhe!”

A startled, graying professor Katara vaguely recognized from the university appeared at the top of the stairs, still wrapped in sleeping robes. “Meixiang?”

“I need to force-feed this boy a *map*!”

One brow went up, and he peered at Aang. Shook his head, and sighed. “Second set of shelves, two down, right hand side. And try not to scar him before I get there, hmm?”

“Sokka has plenty of maps,” Katara started.

“Then he hasn’t been looking at them,” Meixiang stated, opening the door to a scroll-strewn study. She picked her way down the shelves, took out three scrolls, put one back, and spread a map of the Earth Kingdom on a small table. “Look. We’re here.” She tapped the massive double oval of walls that marked Ba Sing Se. “The Fire Nation has invaded here-” her hand swept over the western peninsula and coast “-and while no one tells us of the war, they’ve probably moved to invade the other water route, into Chameleon Bay and the two lakes.”

“They’re cutting you off,” Sokka nodded. “That’s why we have to be here.”

“No!” Meixiang shot him a look of mingled anger and impatience. “That’s why you *shouldn’t* be here!”

“She’s right, you know.” Professor Tingzhe walked in behind them, robe tied. “In Chin the Conqueror’s time, Ba Sing Se almost fell before Kyoshi defeated him-”

“You mean killed him,” Aang said, disgusted.

“And what would you have had her do? Invite him to a tea ceremony?” Tingzhe regarded Aang with a level look. “The city almost fell, true. But Chin had far more solid a grip on the continent than the Fire Nation has yet managed. And Kyoshi was *not* within these walls. That led Chin to split his forces, and that itself might have led to his defeat even if she had not acted.” His gaze went to Sokka. “I’ve been told you have some small grasp on tactics... so long as Avatar Aang is inside Ba Sing Se, the Fire Nation can concentrate their forces. Which allows them to develop the

simplest and shortest supply lines possible, and....” Seeing their looks of confusion, he grimaced. “Earthbending, Avatar. Think of the Earth Kingdom as a mighty boulder. What is more likely to shatter it? Scattered, small strikes? Or one massive blow?”

“What are you *doing*?”

Katara jerked her attention to the aghast teenage boy in the doorway. Taller than Sokka, earth-green eyes, face dark with not-yet-shaved morning stubble. “You can’t be talking about this!” the young man went on. “You know what can happen. You know what happened to Bai Xiu!”

“I do know, Min,” Tingzhe said soberly. “But I also know to do nothing against evil is not a neutral act.” He glanced at Aang. “A mistake your people made, centuries ago. The Earth Kingdom has long memories. It cost you. Dearly.” He looked back at his son. “I have done nothing because there was nothing I *could* do. But the Avatar is here, and our fate is already in the Dai Li’s hands.”

“Not if I can help it,” Meixiang said grimly.

“This is crazy,” Min breathed, looking between his parents. “*You’re* crazy. You can’t- you never would have done this before *he* showed up!”

“Who’s he?” Katara pounced. “Lee?”

From the flare of anger in Min’s eyes, she knew she’d hit home. “Get out,” Min snarled at them. “Get out of here, before you get my family killed!”

“Min!” Tingzhe said sternly. “You will not behave so to guests. Even uninvited ones.”

“Nobody’s going to be killed,” Aang said stubbornly. “Just tell me how I can help. I’m the Avatar. Helping people is what I do.”

“You can’t help,” Min growled, turning on his heel and stomping off.

“Min, wait,” Katara said impulsively, running after him to the foot of the stairs. “If your family’s in trouble, we can do something!”

“You’re *kids*,” Min said dismissively. “What are you going to do, hold off a thousand Dai Li single-handed? I don’t even know why Mom let you in! She knows what this could do to us, what this could do to my brother and sisters. And Dad’s *helping* her....” Fists clenched, he shook his head. “Go. Just - go.”

“You can’t give up,” Katara said, determined. “Maybe we’re strangers here. Maybe we can’t do anything. But they’re your family! There’s got to be something *you* can do.”

“Yeah,” Min said, half to himself, eyes dark. “I guess there is.”

They could have used the door, Zuko reflected. But Toph was having way too much fun.

Bits of rock crumbling in every direction, they tumbled into a chamber that smelled like hay and thick fur and *outside*. Chains clinked, and he looked up at a massive shape of white and tan and sharp black horns-

“Appa! Hey, fuzzy!” Toph ran straight for a furry foreleg. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry....”

Are you crazy? Zuko spun and leaped, trying to get between her and furry death. *That thing is-*

His glove touched an arrow of fur, and the world wavered.

Half-light of dawn fell over a grassy mountain meadow, and Aang was chuckling as he scratched under dark horns. “Don’t worry. Appa’s a vegetarian.”

The firebender snorted. “You’ve never seen komodo-rhino calves born, have you?”

Dawn went out like a candle, and Zuko took a hasty half-step sideways to keep from staggering. *What was that?*

That never happened. I know it never happened.

So why did it feel real?

“Appa?” Jet finally quit fighting his friends, though he glared at Zuko. “The Dai Li had the Avatar’s bison?”

Still have. Unless we move. Zuko tapped Toph on the shoulder while she was wiping her eyes, pointed up to the grate closing off the skylight. *It’ll be tight, but it’s big enough to fly out.*

“Right!” Straightening, Toph waved to the freedom fighters. “Climb on!” Dropped her voice to a whisper. “Um. Can’t see in the air, how are we going to-?”

“You know how many times I’ve watched Aang fly away?” Zuko murmured back, unlocking the first massive manacle. “We can do this.”

Toph scooted around to hit the locks on the other side, and Appa’s wide head moved back and forth to watch them both. Turned toward Zuko again as he reached for the last metal twist-key-

Sucked in a breath that *spiraled*, lifting the key half clear.

“Smart,” Zuko whispered to the bison, untwisting it the rest of the way. “Don’t get caught this way twice.” He leapt up to perch on the back of the furry neck, and latched onto Toph’s hand, pulling her up-

Rock surged, sucking in the bison’s feet. Appa bellowed, tail flailing with a mighty wind.

“Struggle all you like.” Long Feng advanced through the open door, ranks of Dai Li behind him. “You’re going-”

“Trust me!” Zuko hissed, and swung Toph down.

Her feet hit rock, and she twisted her toes, stone dissolving into sand. “Yip yip!”

Zuko pulled even as Appa launched, a solid lump of earthbender driving the breath from him in the wake of Appa’s wind.

Grate’s coming up awfully fast-

Toph punched, and they soared free into dawn.

“Yes!” Smellerbee caterwauled, dour face stretched in an incredulous grin.

“Why?” Jet demanded, voice full of hate. “You’re a *firebender*. Why are you doing this?”

“Because not everybody in the Fire Nation’s crazy, you blockhead!” Toph yanked off her mask.

"I'm Aang's earthbending teacher. And *he's* a friend."

"A friend?"

Agni. Longshot can talk.

"Yeah. And he *can't* get caught." Toph leaned back next to Zuko. "Now what?"

"Follow what I do," Zuko murmured. "The Nomads didn't always use reins." Taking her hand in his own, he pressed near Appa's left horn. The bison obligingly banked.

I wish we could go slower. But there's no time.

He urged Appa up and over the Outer Wall, dodging blocks of stone hefted by startled guards.

"Now, that's just rude," Toph complained.

Zuko snorted, guiding Appa down at least an hour's ride outside the Wall. Pointed at the freedom fighters, and swept a hand toward the ground.

"You're just going to leave us here?" Jet burst out. "We've got nothing!"

"We're out of Ba Sing Se," Smellerbee shot back, jumping down. "That's *not* nothing."

Silent again, Longshot yanked Jet off.

"Here!" Toph tossed a coin-string Smellerbee's general direction. "I'm Toph Bei Fong. And one of these days, you're going to pay me back!" She patted Appa's head. "Yip yip!"

"Can you afford that?" Zuko asked, keeping his voice low as they climbed skyward. "You're going to need to run-"

Toph waved it off. "Hello? Earth Rumble *champion*? I'm good. Besides, people give Aang stuff. We'll be fine."

"Like Azula," Zuko muttered under his breath.

Toph frowned. "Um, Sparky? She's almost as short and bouncy, I'll give you that. But why would you think Aang's anything like her?"

"Everything's easy for her." Heading back over the wall too high for boulders, Zuko swallowed hard. "Look at him. Twelve years old, and he's a master. A few *months*, and he could waterbend. Don't tell me he's not getting in days what took you *years*." He looked aside. "And everyone *helps* him. Everyone says he's doing the right thing. Agni, even the *spirits* want him to win."

"I kind of want him to win too, Sparky."

"At least you're honest about it," Zuko said tiredly. "I wish I could stop the war, Toph. I really wish I could. But I can't. Because you know what will happen if it stops? They'll come for us. The Earth Kingdom, the Water Tribes... you have no *idea* how much they hate us. They'll come. And what will the Avatar do then?"

"...Aang wouldn't let that happen. Not to anybody."

"Don't lie to me, Toph," Zuko said angrily. "Sozin destroyed everything Aang knew. *Everything*. You haven't been to the Air Temples. I have. I've seen them *all*." Taking her mask and his own, he threw them into Lake Laogai. "The North Pole was just a warm-up!"

“Zuko-”

“Just get them out, Toph. Get them *out*.” He took the cloak off her shoulders, preparing to reverse it from dark to a pale green to hide the Blue Spirit’s outfit. “Drop me in the Upper Ring. I’ll tell you where. And then, this is what you do....”

“Sokka, we’ve got to go back and help them!”

Keeping a good grip on yellow and orange, Sokka kept walking. “I think we’ve helped them enough, Aang.” *Hit the Fire Nation from behind. Like sending a decoy hunter to strike the tiger-seals, and drive them the way you want them to go. I should have thought of that. Why didn’t I think of that?*

I got caught up in “I must defeat the Fire Lord”, that’s why. And maybe the spirits do want Aang to take him one-on-one. Crazy as that sounds. But big and evil as he is, Fire Lord Ozai’s just one guy. We’ve got whole armies to worry about.

Still. The Wens didn’t know about the eclipse. They had a chance to knock out the Fire Lord *and* his main guys in the Fire Nation. They had to take it. But in order to do *that*, they had to see the Earth King, and get the generals on their side.

And for that, we need Toph. I hate to say it, but it looks like the only way we’re going to get anywhere is start knocking down walls-

“Sokka!” Katara grabbed his wrist, startling him into letting go of Aang. “Look!”

Sokka’s jaw dropped. White and brown with a patch of green clinging for dear life, flying north, then east, south, west, and back around the rough square-

“*Appa!*” Snapping his glider open, Aang hurtled into the air.

“Oh, boy,” Sokka breathed, pulling out his boomerang as Katara flicked open her waterskin. The green shadows on the roofs were heading for the streets, and the moment those stone shoes touched earth-

Appa swooped down, Aang holding his staff out so they could grab on, sucking them up with a friendly wind.

Stone gloves crashed through empty air, and they were flying.

“Appa!” Aang was clinging to the bison’s head, tears running. “Oh, I *missed* you, buddy....”

“Toph!” Katara grabbed the white-faced earthbender, pulled her back to anchor between the two of them. “You’re all right!”

“Hey,” Toph said breathlessly. “Hope you didn’t leave anything you can’t live without in the mansion. I just took out a dozen Dai Li, and *boy* are they mad.”

“The *Dai Li* had Appa?” Aang yelped.

“It gets a lot worse than that, Twinkletoes.” Toph tried to put on a brave face, but she was shivering.

She can’t see anything, and we don’t even have a saddle to grab onto. Sokka hand-walked a few inches closer, making sure Toph was wedged up against Katara. “Let’s land somewhere and talk.”

“Not in the city!” Toph gulped, and clung tighter. “There’s an island. Out in the lake. Should be safe for a while.”

“Toph,” Katara said, worried, “how do you know there’s an island over there?”

“Lee told me,” Toph said practically. “He gave me a letter for you, Sokka. You better read it.”

Sokka traded a glance with Aang. The airbender looked ahead, and nodded. “One island, coming up!”

They tumbled off Appa’s back onto gritty sand, and Toph shook out cramped fingers. Grimly, she drew folded paper out of her robes. “Here.” She whipped a finger toward Katara before his sister could speak. “And no questions! Not until *after* Sokka reads it.”

“Okay,” Katara said, one brow raised dubiously. “Sokka?”

Sokka unfolded neat creases, and even Aang stopped scratching Appa to listen.

Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe, neatly inked characters read.

If Toph hasn’t already convinced you to get out of Ba Sing Se, leave. Now.

This isn’t Omashu, or any of the other places you’ve been. The Earth King is a figurehead; a political center everyone can refer to as the ultimate authority, even though they know he’s nothing of the kind. The real power in Ba Sing Se is the Grand Secretariat, Long Feng, head of the Dai Li. The generals know this, and are in willing collusion with him. They know what the Dai Li do, but they rely on them to keep order in the city while they battle the Fire Nation. By any means necessary. They know the Dai Li warp people’s minds. They know the Dai Li make some people disappear. They know, and they permit it to go on.

Ba Sing Se is a trap.

Refugees are drawn here by the hope of escaping the war. Once inside, they are told there is no war in Ba Sing Se. Those who cannot accept this, disappear. Those who can and are not broken usually fight on the Wall. Those who break - and many do - work in Ba Sing Se, living a lie. Whatever the original purpose behind this policy, it drains the countryside of potential pockets of resistance, keeps the city itself controlled by fear, and fosters an enduring - and because it is unspoken, irrational - hate of the Fire Nation. I’m sure Fire Lord Ozai would approve.

People who use these tactics are not your allies.

If none of this convinces you, consider why Long Feng had the bison. He has reports from General Fong on the Avatar State. He knows the Fire Navy was shattered at the North Pole. He, or the generals, have decided this is a viable tactic to wreak destruction on the Fire Nation.

The philosophy of the airbenders was that all life is precious. If you want your friend to be himself, and not a living weapon - get out.

It wasn’t signed.

It was weird, though. Something about the words was familiar. Like Sokka could almost hear the voice to match them, if he just remembered-

“Lee gave you this?” Katara said skeptically. “Why didn’t he just tell us?”

"That does seem weird." Aang scratched the back of his neck. "I mean, Monk Gyatso always said the Water Tribes weren't great letter writers... not that that's a bad thing! It's great that you like to talk to people face to face. But you can kind of lose track of someone if they don't visit."

And we couldn't visit the Northern Tribe, being raided all the time, Sokka realized. They just... stopped coming. We got raided for years, and they never sent help. Until Aang broke the Fire Navy for them.

They had reasons. He was sure. But-

"Three reasons," Toph said bluntly, shaking him out of his grim thoughts. "One, *we* were being watched. Two, we had to go in to get Appa, fast, and I think he was worried he wouldn't get back out. He hasn't been waterbending that long, and he *couldn't* under the lake, or the Dai Li would know who he was. Three... he didn't want you guys to see him because he didn't want to wind up full of icicles."

"What?" Katara said in disbelief.

Sokka looked at the letter, and the phrasing, and winced. "Lee's not Water Tribe."

"But he's a waterbender," Katara started.

"He's Fire Nation." Toph angled her head toward Aang. "He wanted to help, but he was scared. He's heard about the North Pole. A *lot* of people have."

"A *Fire Nation* waterbender?" Katara looked like someone had slapped her with a saw-dogfish.

"He said something about being from the colonies." Toph didn't take her ears off Aang.

The airbender seemed to shrink in on himself. "I didn't mean to do... that." He tried to smile. "He's really Fire Nation? Wow, that must be weird-"

"You don't get to dodge this one, Twinkletoes." Toph crossed her arms, immovable as granite. "Maybe you didn't want to. Maybe you didn't *mean* to. But you *did* it. And *everybody* thinks you're going to do it again. Long Feng. The generals. The whole *Fire Nation*." She shook her head. "You should have heard Lee. He felt *awful*. Here he is, with the only waterbender he can find who doesn't care where he came from - and *you* show up. If he doesn't get you out of here, the Fire Nation smashes Ba Sing Se to bits and he's got nowhere left to go. If he *does* get you out, he's helping the guy who killed thousands of his people. Talk about a rock and a hard place!"

"Well he should feel awful!" Katara flared. "After everything the Fire Nation's done to the world? To us? To Aang? He should feel so horrible he should just - just crawl away and die!"

What the heck is with- oh. Sokka saw her fingers touch her necklace, and grimaced. *It's that time of year again. When we lost Mom.*

"Katara," Aang started patiently.

"You *take that back!*" Toph's fists clenched, sand hardening under her feet into solid stone. "Lots of people help us because they *want* to. Because they know Aang's the Avatar, and they think he's gonna stomp the Fire Nation and stop the war. Lee didn't! Lee doesn't like Aang! He doesn't want anything to *do* with Aang. He helped get Appa back because it was the right thing to do. Because he doesn't want Aang to ever hurt the way he did at the North Pole again! You take that *back!*"

She's crying? Sokka realized, jaw dropping. Toph was too *tough* to cry.

“Lee told me,” Toph said, voice thick with angry tears. “He *told* me, and I didn’t want to believe him. He said even if the Fire Nation stopped the war, you’d bring it right back to them. That I didn’t know how much the Water Tribes *hated* the Fire Nation. He helped me, he’s a *waterbender*, and all you want him to do is die?” She swallowed hard. “Aang, how are you going to stop the war?”

“And then what?” Toph demanded. “We’re going to use the eclipse. We’re going to kick Fire Lord butt. But you’re going to need more than us to do it! Earth Kingdom, Water Tribes - and there they’re gonna be, right in the middle of the people they hate! *Then what?*”

“Then what we saw at the party, all these weeks of trouble.... Long Feng is in control of the city. I think we should just keep flying and leave this horrible place behind us.”

“But we escaped from the Dai Li. And we got Appa back. We’re on a roll,” Sokka said confidently. “We should go to the Earth King now and tell him our plan. Before Long Feng can get to him.”

“Maybe Long Feng already got to him,” Toph objected. “I heard them making Joo Dees under the lake. They just... *make* these ladies so they’ll say what the Dai Li want them to say! What if they did that to the Earth King, too?”

“Then we have to go to him, so Katara can heal him.” Aang looked between them all, full of that sureness that everything in the world could be fixed if they just *tried*. “If he knows the truth about the Dai Li and the war, I know he’ll help! It’s the right thing to do.” He glanced up suddenly, and raced to the lakeshore.

“Aang, what’s-” Sokka looked out into the water. *Earth Kingdom ships*. “Um... how many Dai Li did you say you squashed?”

“There were a lot of them.” Toph touched a toe to the water, obviously unhappy. “They’re out there?”

“Probably. So....” Sokka turned to Katara, sure of what she’d say. Mention healing, and she was all over the situation.

Too close.

Iroh sat in their new apartment with a cup of fragrant jasmine tea, watching his nephew sleep the sleep of an exhausted infiltrator. But only sleep. No sign of the deadly fever that would mark a break of his father's loyalty. Not yet.

But it will come, Iroh reflected grimly. *I have tried to balance him on a knife's edge... and he is slipping.*

The Avatar. Why here? Why now? Was the spirits' plan so desperate it could not have waited another month? Even another *week*?

Our flight weakened us. Amaya and I have done what we can... but I do not know if he is strong enough to survive. If his loyalty breaks now....

Fingers wrapped around his tea, Iroh tried to hold onto hope.

It slipped through his grasp like ashes.

"...The Council of Five and the military are loyal to the Earth King, but the Dai Li remain loyal to you, Long Feng, sir."

Long Feng smiled behind walls sheathed in steel, considering plots upon plots and options the Avatar's little group of troublemakers had never dreamed of. So the Earth King had proved easily swayed? Then he would be as swiftly swayed back, once given information that rather than fighting against the Fire Nation, the Avatar's allies were agents of the Fire Lord himself.

Poor little Bei Fong, by now trapped and unable to dispute his Dai Li's evidence... especially given her little friends were now scattered to the winds, save for one overconfident waterbender. He'd seen benders puffed up with their supposed mastery before. Katara could easily be neutralized. The Kyoshi Warriors were a less predictable factor... but they'd offered their services to Full Moon Bay to fight in the war. They should be easily convinced it didn't matter who was in charge in Ba Sing Se.

And once Lee had given up his firebender contact - and been *convinced* to give evidence of his conspiracy with the Fire Nation and Shirong, so the Earth King would see only a rogue Dai Li at fault and not his most *trusted* advisor - these steel bars would be but a memory.

Min Wen will make a fine agent, indeed.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, did anybody else look at what was found in Long Feng's office and think, "Trap!"

We know Long Feng's a plotter, and has been for decades. Information related to the Gaang, that those generals could find in his office? That just happens to get his latest enemies-slash-annoyances scattered to the four winds, with two of the three powerful benders out of the city entirely?

Right. Trap.

Azula piggy-backing on the opportunity to get in was probably the one thing Long

Feng didn't see coming. But then, she was born lucky.

Assume most of "The Earth King" happened as canon, minus Appa's tooth-marks and Zuko's hallucinations. Poor guy. He'd probably prefer the hallucinations, compared to what's coming.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

And my brother chased these fools for months? Azula thought contemptuously, lounging at her ease in their Upper Ring guest quarters as Ty Lee and Mai surreptitiously checked their rooms for spy-holes and listening posts. They were sure to be here, just as they were in the ambassadorial rooms put at their disposal in the palace. The trick was to locate the most likely spots, and shape their conversations accordingly.

Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe, Azula recalled, committing the name to her mental files of useful idiots. It was good to know exactly who among your enemies was fool enough to let in those he assumed were allies without *ever* checking for himself.

Zuzu chased you across the world and couldn't catch you. But I don't have to chase you anymore. All I have to do is wait... and gather the forces I need to take out the Avatar once and for all.

And thanks to the Earth King, she knew precisely where to find them. What a naïve, *useful* young man. Perhaps she'd leave him as a puppet. He was so good at it.

Sitting in front of her mirror, Mai signaled a subtle, *currently clear*.

Azula smiled. "We have been presented with an extraordinary opportunity, girls...."

An opportunity her brother would never have seized. Poor Zuzu. Bent on removing a threat to the Fire Nation, and never seeing that threat mobilized their people to make all their conquests possible.

My brother never did have vision. Even before Dad took half of it away.

A pity Fire Lord Ozai hadn't finished the job. But that was all right. As soon as Ba Sing Se was on its knees, she'd *find* dear Zuzu....

And finally indulge in being an only child.

Well, the good news is the Avatar took his bison and left, Shirong reflected, stalking down one of the palace's little-used corridors as if he had every right to be there. *The bad news is, the Avatar's little band raised more havoc than a chest full of ninety-nine-year spirits, Long Feng's been arrested, the generals are making some kind of massive plans....*

And I'm being watched.

Off and on, not at all times... but even so, it made no sense. If Lee had left some sign of his identity breaking the bison free, then they should both be in interrogation rooms even now. If Lee hadn't - why the watching eyes?

Whatever it is, it can't be good.

Which was why he'd moved to intercept Lee here, before the healer stood a chance of encountering any new faces in the palace, rather than waiting in the garden. He had an excuse, if anyone asked. It was even true.

And there's my young break-in artist.

"You'd better get well soon," Lee said, smile crooked. "I'm missing my uncle's grand opening--"

"You might want to watch your step today," Shirong said, carefully casual.

"Why?" the healer asked warily.

"It's better if I just show you. That way, you'll know what parts of the palace to avoid." *And hopefully, that will give my watchers time to relax.*

Not that his fellow agents would allow themselves to be bored. But *complacent*... yes, that was possible. If the Dai Li knew where their targets were heading, and so relaxed - it might give them breathing room. Particularly since these young women were definitely in the Earth King's favor.

Lee kept his questions to himself, only pausing near the outskirts of the section in question to murmur, "Ambassadorial quarters?"

"I suppose they were, once," Shirong said, startled. "How did you know?"

"Color scheme."

Which made no sense whatsoever-

Shirong blinked, and looked at decorative friezes and tapestries with fresh eyes. The dominant colors were greens and browns, as befitted a palace of the Earth Kingdom. But there were also touches of blue, and yellow, and even hints of red and black.

The elements, Shirong realized. *I've walked these halls for twenty years and never saw it.* "Are you certain you won't change your mind?" he said wistfully, stopping for a moment in the shadow of a pillar. "We could use you. Now more than ever."

"It wouldn't be honorable," Lee started.

And vanished.

No stranger to taking the high ground, Shirong joined the young waterbender up near the ceiling. *I'll be. He got the ice gloves to work.*

Though they were more lumps than gloves, frozen to stone. Still, it was working; panic could do wonders for any focused bender. And Lee was definitely half a breath from panic.

White as he is? I'd give fifty-fifty on just fainting.

Shirong shook his head minutely, and moved so he could catch Lee if things went wrong. He'd heard those armored young ladies were good, but Lee's meeting must have really left a mark-

"Will we be able to speak to General How?" the black-haired leader said to a palace guard, marching with precise and graceful steps as her two subordinates trailed in her wake. "Much as the Earth King has honored us with his welcome, we would be most grateful for the chance to address a leader skilled and ingenious enough to come up with such a plan."

"The general's very busy, ma'am, but I'm sure something can be arranged...."

Shirong waited until they were out of earshot to murmur, "Sorry about the shock. I thought it would be better to show you where the Kyoshi Warriors are--"

“They’re *not* Kyoshi Warriors.”

Grim. Angry. And desperately afraid. Shirong heard it all in Lee’s voice, and tried not to shiver. “What?”

“Outside,” Lee whispered, face gray. “We have to- I can’t- *air*.”

Shirong led them both to their usual garden, all too aware they were likely to be watched. But it was one of the few places they shouldn’t have guests stumbling on them. And the way Lee’s face had just *shut down*, like a soldier cut off and about to be swarmed....

If it’s that bad, we might want the rest of the Dai Li to know. “What do you mean, they’re not Kyoshi Warriors?”

“They’re Fire Nation.”

The world seemed to tilt sideways. Shirong forced himself to catch his breath, and silently cursed himself for using his rock gloves so casually earlier. His chi still wasn’t up to bending. “Those outfits, that makeup - how can you possibly-?”

“I know, all right?” Lee drew a breath, deliberately unclenching his fists. “I know *them*.”

“How convenient.”

Shirong whipped his head around, taking in Quan’s grim look, a pale Min Wen in a trainee’s outfit-
We’re dead.

But he wasn’t about to go down without a fight, weak chi or not. “Why?” Shirong asked, trying not to let his heartbreak show in his voice. And wondering why it cut so very keenly. He was Dai Li, he knew the score; it didn’t matter if you were loyal, if Ba Sing Se would be more stable without you. “I’ve always acted to protect this city.”

“By concealing the presence of Fire Nation colonials, and allowing them to make contact with a firebender infiltrated inside?” Quan’s gaze was hard as he eyed Lee. “It’ll go easier with you if you give the firebender up.”

“No,” Lee said dryly, stance ready and calm as he glanced at Min. “I don’t think it will.” He looked back at Quan, unshakable as granite. “You don’t want to do this. You’ve got bigger problems than me. You don’t know who they are-”

“Yes. They do.”

Gleaming steel flew, and Lee dodged by a hair, rolling to come up in a classic firebending stance.

Why? He has his waterskin - why firebending?

One of the Warriors stood, ready to throw more of the razor edges glinting between her fingers. Her voice was cold, with a studied disinterest that chilled Shirong to the core; she might look like a teenage girl, but she was undoubtedly lethal. “Well. Looks like there’s going to be a family reunion.”

Fire Nation. Lee was right.

“Mai,” Lee breathed, not moving from stance. “Don’t do it.”

“Why?” Gold eyes narrowed. “You never wrote me back.”

Lee glared. “She almost killed Uncle, and you’re upset about a *letter*?”

“Your uncle’s a traitor. You know what that means.” A black brow flicked slightly upward. “And what do you mean, *a letter*?”

I had questions about you, Lee, Shirong thought, dryly amused, focused on steel, *but this wasn’t how I thought I’d get my answers.*

Wait. Just wait. Someone’s going to twitch-

“Are you two talking or killing each other?” Min wondered, held back by Quan’s hand from bending. At either side.

“*Shut up,*” both Fire Nation teens snapped.

Either’s still possible, then, Shirong thought wryly. But if they were talking, they weren’t killing each other. And given Quan seemed just as coolly interested in hearing more.... *Keep them talking. Long enough to get your strength back.* “Let me guess. You’re related?”

“No.” Mai’s lip curled.

“Yes,” Lee sighed.

“*What?*”

“Uncle looked it up when you kept getting serious! He couldn’t figure out why your parents thought they had a chance with my father when there aren’t any benders in your-”

“There are!” Mai’s voice finally betrayed a hint of anger. “Momiji was adopted out because she wasn’t, I know that, but her parents were-”

“Her mother was Ta Min, I know,” Lee said impatiently. “She was Ilah’s mother, too!”

Dead silence.

Ilah, Shirong thought furiously. *I’ve heard that name before, somewhere- oh.* Damn, Lee had no luck at all, did he? Who’d named their daughter after Fire Lord Ozai’s mother? “So you *are* related.”

“Second-third cousins,” Lee said impatiently. “Maybe a little closer, given some of the families... never mind. I *told* you this, Mai! In the last letter, after - after. It *wasn’t* going to happen, it didn’t matter who your father greased at court - you didn’t need my kind of trouble!”

Mai’s stance didn’t waver, but gold eyes were wide. “...I think I’m going to be sick.”

Shirong added up what he’d heard, and blinked. “Old girlfriend?” he asked Lee dryly.

“I was thirteen!” Lee said defensively. “It’s *hard* to find records on children adopted out, even when it’s recent. This was a hundred and twenty-one years ago!” He actually took his eyes off Mai, just long enough to give Shirong an aggravated look. “Like Uncle says, I’ve done a lot of foolish things in my life. But this? This one, is not my fault!”

“It has to be.” Mai’s voice was flat, and bitter as wormwood. “She *promised* me.”

“She lies, Mai.” Lee’s fists were clenched, but his eyes were sad. “Azula *always* lies.”

Shirong felt his heart speed up, and hoped to hell his bending could match it. “*Princess Azula* is in the palace?” Seeing Quan’s studiously neutral expression, Shirong blanched. “And you *knew*. Oma and Shu, why haven’t you-?”

“We are loyal to Long Feng, Shirong,” Quan said bluntly. “It’s a shame you forgot that.”

Lee let out a bitter laugh. “I never thought I’d feel sorry for Long Feng.” He narrowed fire-green eyes at Quan. “She’ll chew him up and spit him out. He’ll just see a little girl, playing with plots she can’t *really* understand. She’ll smile at him, and tell him how smart he is - and when she’s done, he’ll be dead. Or wish he was.” He flicked a glance at Min. “You should run. As far and fast as you can. If Azula gets her hands on you, your family’s dead.”

“I did this to *save* my family!” Min said fiercely. “This is your fault! You’re nothing but trouble!”

“From the night I was born,” Lee agreed, a bitter smile ghosting over his face. “Funny thing is? I understand. I do. You do... horrible things, when you’re trying to keep your family together. You try not to see that your sister’s a monster... and your father’s a bloodthirsty murderer.”

“Don’t say things like that!” Mai took a step forward, alarmed. “You’re not a traitor!”

“That’s not what Azula said, when she tried to take us in chains,” Lee bit out. “Did she mention that? Or trying to kill me with a lightning bolt?”

“She wouldn’t!”

“You know damn well she would, Mai!” Lee snarled. “Azula always gets what she wants. Always! There’s just one thing left she hasn’t got. One thing the Fire Sages won’t give her as long as I’m alive! *You know that!*”

I have the pieces, Shirong thought, stunned. *It just doesn’t make sense....*

Mai shook her head, black bangs barely stirring. “She’s your *sister*, Zuko.”

Oh. My. Spirits....

Well. Now he knew why *Agni* had graced his altar with a sign, after that desperate prayer.

One of your children, indeed.

“That’s never stopped her before.” Lee - *Prince Zuko* - deepened his stance, obviously seeing *opponent*, not ex-girlfriend. “If she takes me, I’m dead. *Uncle* is dead-”

Uncle? Shirong’s eyes bugged, and he saw Quan blink, making the connection. *Oma and Shu! General Iroh is here?*

“-And if you don’t give a damn about us, there’s an *hono’o shoshinsha* who doesn’t deserve what’s going to happen!”

One of those words is flame, Shirong thought. *What’s the other?*

Whatever it was, it stopped Mai in her tracks. Her glance flicked to the palace, then back. “You know I’m loyal to her.”

“I know,” Zuko said plainly. “But you know I’ve never lied to you.” He didn’t even glance at the

earthbenders. “Don’t do it, Quan. I’d hate to hurt you. But there are people counting on me. People Azula will kill, if she catches them.” He swallowed. “And she’ll make it hurt a long, long time.”

The utter surety in his voice must have reached Quan. The senior agent stepped back, hands down.

“You can’t be,” Min said in disbelief. “Not a- you have-”

“I showed disrespect to the Fire Lord.” Zuko’s voice was cold and sharp as ice-shattered flint. “Ask Quan. Every noble in the whole damn *world* laughs about it. I’d be surprised if the Dai Li don’t have all the *juicy details*.”

Exiled forever, Shirong recalled, forcing his stunned brain to work. *Unless he can return with the Avatar-*

I sent him after the Avatar’s bison. To save Ba Sing Se. And he let it go.

Heart in his throat, he stepped to Zuko’s side.

“What are you doing?” Quan said in disbelief.

“Avatar Kyoshi created us to serve the city, not one man.” Shirong tried not to let his voice shake. *Spirits, what’s wrong with me?* “Quan, what if he’s right? Call me a rogue; set a hunt for me if you have to! But the plan I told you about - it’s good. It could *work*. And what have you lost? Minor resources, easily replaced. Troublemakers Ba Sing Se doesn’t need. What does it cost the Dai Li to let us try? The Dai Li, not Long Feng!”

Quan considered that a long moment. Sighed, and inclined his head.

Mai’s stance coiled. Ready to throw. Zuko tensed-

“Fifteen minutes,” she said coldly. “Then I scream.”

Nodding, Zuko fled.

Scrambling to catch up - damn, he was fast! - Shirong hit the garden wall beside the exiled prince. “Do you believe her?”

“*Climb.*”

Steel sang and clattered off stone, a hair’s breadth from their feet. “She said-”

“Fifteen until she *screams*.” Zuko went up like a wasp-spider, fingers clinging to cracks as surely as if he were in rock gloves. “If it doesn’t look right - you don’t want to know what Azula will do.”

“No wonder you’re paranoid.” Breasting the wall, Shirong dropped, bending as his feet hit so the ground yielded instead of his ankles. *I’m in no shape for this*. “She’s really your-”

“Yes.” Uncoiling from the impact, Zuko raced onward, heading for the outer wall of the palace and the closest gate.

Shirong kept pace, relieved when the guards took one look at them and started opening the portal. Running waterbender with running Dai Li - that was a symptom of the kind of trouble no sane guard wanted to deal with. “And she’s really tried to-”

“I stopped counting when I was eleven.” They bolted out the gate, and Zuko sucked in a breath. “She didn’t try so often after Uncle came home. The one good thing about exile was it was away

from *her!*”

Through crowds, down streets; they finally fetched up behind a sweets shop, as lights were flashing in Shirong’s vision. “Breathe,” Zuko ordered, propping him up from one side. “I need to think.”

“We’re doomed,” Shirong croaked, fighting for air. *I should leave. I’m slowing him down. Too injured to run, too weak to fight-*

“I need you to warn the Wens.”

“Min bargained for their safety,” Shirong gasped. Quan might be a fool for dealing with the demon-princess, but he wasn’t *that* stupid.

“If Azula gets near Jinhai, no one’s safe.” Zuko weighed him a second longer, and breathed out sharply. “Firebenders can feel each other.”

Jinhai bends with hot water. A weird, off-the-wall comment he’d let slide, in the wake of trying to do something about the spirit that had nearly eaten... his waterbending recruit.

Prince Zuko. A firebender. *How in the world can he-?* “I’ve seen you make *ice*,” Shirong protested.

“Azula hasn’t.” Zuko’s smirk was shadowed, but real. “If Quan tells her, I’m dead. If he doesn’t... I might actually survive.” He nodded. “Go to Meixiang Wen. They’ve got plans. I think they can hide you. I’ll warn Uncle.”

The Dragon of the West is in my city. Has been, for over a month. “Why do you trust me?” Shirong demanded.

“You promised you’d kill me rather than let the haima-jiao use me,” Zuko said simply. “You do what’s right. And letting a six-year-old fall into Azula’s hands....” He shook his head. “You have honor. Being Earth Kingdom doesn’t change that.”

Shirong regarded the exiled prince through narrowed eyes. “Don’t you dare get killed. We need to have a *long* talk.”

“Later,” Zuko agreed dryly. And faded into the crowd.

One ex-boyfriend, escaped, Mai calculated coldly. His rogue Dai Li agent, likewise. Quan seemed willing to keep silent, and rein in his trainee. And as for the princess who would soon wonder where she was-

She lied to me. Azula lied. To me.

Azula lied to Zuko; everyone knew that. Prince Zuko and political maneuvering mixed about as well as oil and sparks, with much the same results. It just wasn’t prudent to tell Zuko the truth about which nobles were really in the Fire Lord’s favor, or what new maneuvers the army was using, or... anything.

But she told me the Fire Lord would approve our engagement. Just as soon as - as he changed his mind about Zuko’s exile....

And when had Fire Lord Ozai ever changed his mind? About anything?

“The best way to lie to someone,” Azula had laughed, during one late-night planning session, “is to

tell them the truth.”

Mai glanced at the sky. She wasn’t a firebender, to feel the sun’s trek toward the west... but close enough. *Deep breath.*

Mai raised her head to the sun, and loosed phoenix-eagle screams to the sky.

She ignored stunned eyes on her in the sudden silence. “It is Mai,” she said levelly. “Daughter of Niji, and of Governor Tsumami. I pray to be allowed to address Agni.”

Perhaps the sunlight strengthened. Perhaps.

“When loyalty rests with one unworthy of it, honor requires that it not remain.”

A cloud passed over the sun. And what more needed to be said?

“Mai!” Ty Lee bounded in, Azula treading deliberately after her. “What happened?”

“A Fire Nation infiltrator was in the palace,” Quan said smoothly. “If you warrior ladies will excuse us, we need to inform the guards.” Keeping a firm grip on Min’s shoulder, the Dai Li steered his pale recruit inside.

“An infiltrator?” Azula’s gaze took in the knives gleaming in stone, and Mai’s disinterested expression.

“Your brother’s in town,” Mai said coolly.

Azula’s eyes widened, and she drew in a sharp breath. “*Is he.*”

“Zuko’s here?” Ty Lee bounced, smiling brightly. “Is he still cute? Did you get to kiss him-?”

“Why isn’t he here?” Azula interrupted coolly.

Brow arched, Mai started pulling her knives from rock.

“Zuzu’s a fool, not a coward.” Azula tapped a sharp nail against heavy skirts. “If he knows you’re here, he knows I’m here... and he’s not smart enough to run from me. Not when I stand between him and his precious *honor.*” Golden eyes were cold. “Who is he protecting?”

Min, Mai realized, recalling how Quan had gotten the boy *away*. *One of Min’s family is the firebender!* “There was an injured Dai Li agent with him. Someone called him a rogue.” She met Azula’s gaze squarely. “I don’t know why the agent didn’t mention it.”

“Dirty laundry in the Dai Li,” Azula murmured, eyes gleaming. “How convenient.” She smiled. “And how like Zuzu. Picking up *strays.*”

Mai recalled the fate of some stray animals near the palace, and tried not to think. “Should we pursue them?”

“Run off, when we’re guests of his majesty?” Azula’s smile turned almost playful. “That would be rude.” She tilted her head back, looking to the great walls in the distance. “Why waste the effort? Once Long Feng and I have had our chat... we’ll have Zuko brought to *us.*”

This was a good idea, Katara thought, heading for her table with a happy lemur on her shoulder. The Earth King seemed to be a nice young man, but - well, she wasn’t Aang. It made her knees a

little shaky to talk to a king. Tea was just what she-

“I’m brewing as fast as I can!”

Her jaw dropped. The old man behind the counter was - was-

If he’s here - where’s Zuko?

The waterbender didn’t stick around to find out, fleeing down the steps. *Need help, need - no, Toph’s not here, but - Suki! That’s it, I’ll-*

A dark-haired boy in green moved out of the crowd like lightning, poised and *angry* and striking hard as Toph’s rocks.

Can’t breathe.... Katara fumbled for her waterskin, got the cap loose-

Momo leapt into the air with a screech, as Zuko followed the blow to her solar plexus with a bladed hand to her wrist, numbing her fingers before she could call her water. The exiled prince yanked her arm out straight, whirling her around to crash knees-first into the stone steps.

Ow! Bastard. Why? Aang’s not even here- wait, he’s only got one hand on me-

Something cool touched her head, and the world went out.

“Excuse me, she fainted, let me through....”

Zuko? Iroh looked up from his latest brew. *This early?* He took in the scolding lemur strafing Zuko’s hair, the familiar young face over the blue dress in Zuko’s arms, and braced for the worst. “Nephew, when I said you could bring home a nice girl, this wasn’t what I had in mind.” Reaching under the counter, he offered Momo a slice of candied peach.

The lemur snatched it and landed, still scolding.

Servers laughed, and Zuko reddened. “She fainted,” he gritted out, shoulders hunched like any abashed teen. “I thought - maybe some ice water?”

“Of course, how very thoughtful of you,” Iroh chuckled. “Lu, if you could see to the pots....”

The matronly woman who helped with the brewing smiled at him, then turned a stern glance on his nephew. “Mind your uncle, and do don’t anything improper with that young lady, Lee!”

“Thought never crossed my mind,” Zuko said sourly, hefting the young waterbender through the gap in the counter and into the back of the kitchen.

“She doesn’t look hurt.” Iroh kept his voice low, despite the noise of boiling water. Momo sailed in after them, still miffed.

“I put her out.” Zuko laid her gently down. “Master Amaya’s not a strong healer. Yugoda taught her how to make people sleep long enough to work on them. You can’t use it too long, people start having trouble breathing - but I can keep her under a little longer. I have to, she was running from here, which means she saw you, and if she was running *from* you she’d be running to help, and it isn’t, and she doesn’t know, why is she even *here-*”

“Nephew!” Iroh ordered. “Start from the beginning.”

Zuko shuddered, and took a breath. “Azula’s in the palace.”

“...I believe I will sit down,” Iroh mused, claiming a stool.

Zuko waved another away, pacing between counter and stove as if he would otherwise fly apart. “Azula, Mai, Ty Lee - they’re dressed as Kyoshi Warriors. The Dai Li *know* they aren’t, but- Min turned Lee in to the Dai Li for having a *firebender contact*. Quan and Min ambushed me and Shirong, only Mai caught up to all of us. She gave us fifteen minutes. And Quan - Shirong told him the plan could still *work* - he didn’t try to stop us. I sent Shirong to warn the Wens. I hope they can hide him, he shouldn’t be running. Much less running from *her*.” A gulp of air. “I sent him, I came here, I saw *her* - I stopped her. I haven’t gotten much farther. I’ve got to warn Amaya-”

“No,” Iroh said firmly. “I will send a messenger.” Lu had far more qualifications than just brewing. Including a very good game of Pai Sho. “You acted well, and swiftly. But Azula will be looking for you, even if the Dai Li are not.” He nodded toward Katara. “And given that scroll, she will be missed soon enough.”

“She’s been talking to the generals,” Zuko groaned, heel of his hand against his forehead. “I don’t believe this... are they *insane*?”

“No, simply young,” Iroh sighed. “Come. I believe I have not shown you the cellars. *Very* interesting cellars, this shop has....”

“Zuko is *where*?” Sokka asked again as they soared up and away from Chameleon Bay, still not sure he’d heard right. *Wind in my ears. Could be, maybe, has to be... right?*

“Ba Sing Se!” Aang urged Appa onward into the night, leaving the Water Tribe fleet behind. “At least, he’s got to be there. I saw him hit Katara, and then... and then he did something, like Ty Lee, and she just stayed down!”

Like Ty Lee. And it was Zuko, again, hurting his sister, *again*. Like he had with the pirates, and the bounty hunter. Like he had at the North Pole. “They’ve been playing us,” Sokka said, feeling sick. “It must have been an act... spirits, I didn’t know Zuko had that kind of lying in him....”

Aang glanced back at him from Appa’s head, frustrated and puzzled. “What are you talking about?”

“Zuko and Azula,” Sokka shot back, starting to get angry. “They’ve been working together all along!”

“But - we saw her burn Zuko’s uncle-”

“When she knew Katara was *right there*!” Sokka said impatiently. “Katara heals at the drop of a hat! Everybody knows that.”

“But Toph said Zuko wasn’t lying!”

“He didn’t have to!” Sokka yelled back. “Sure, she’s evil and crazy and wants to kill us. She’s Fire Nation! And she’s Zuko’s sister. They *have* to be working together.”

“But Toph said Azula wants to be-”

“Toph’s an only child,” Sokka waved that feeble protest off. “She doesn’t know what it’s like to have a little sister. Or a big brother. Believe me, if I got kicked out of the Water Tribe? Katara

would do *anything* to get me back. That's what sisters *do*." At Aang's doubtful look, he scowled, leaning forward. "Look, you're the one with the crazy spirit visions! You *saw* Zuko hit her. Like Ty Lee! And we *know* Azula and the rest of them were outside Ba Sing Se a few weeks back. They must have found Zuko, and he must have snuck in! It's obvious!"

"But... I didn't think he'd hurt Iroh that way," Aang said reluctantly. "He seemed to really... care."

"Yeah, well, remember what happened to the North Pole, and Yue," Sokka said harshly. "He cares more about his honor than anybody."

Katara. Hang on. We're coming.

This isn't real. Hidden in one of the many catacombs under Ba Sing Se, Suyin cradled her head in her hands and tried not to cry. *Please, make this not be real....*

But the bent stone she was sitting on was real. The Dai Li agent, Shirong, talking things over quietly with her parents, was real. Jinhai helping a lemur build a fort with wooden blocks, trying to be brave, was real. And the teenage waterbender in blue leggings and dress, out cold on a ledge with one of their mother's quilted jackets to keep her warm... she was far too real.

Min betrayed Lee. Betrayed us. I don't understand...

I don't want to understand! How could he do that? How?

"I know it doesn't help, but your brother was trying to do the right thing."

Wide-eyed, Suyin looked up at the agent, and at her father behind him. Tingzhe looked concerned, but he hadn't pulled out the "Professor Dad" scowl. *So Dad thinks he's okay. Even if he is Dai Li.* "How could turning Lee in be the right thing!"

"I said he was *trying* to, not that he did," Shirong said wryly. "I'm sure the Joo Dees have been managing things so the Avatar hasn't realized how many people he's talked to have been interrogated afterwards. And at least a third of those have *disappeared*. Given your father already has a record of teaching seditious students? Min probably thought we were within hours of pouncing on all of you." The Dai Li's face was sad, and cold as deep winter. "And then Jinhai would have thrown sparks, and you'd all be *dead*."

Suyin shivered.

"As it was... well, he did what I might have done, if I'd been sixteen and desperate," Shirong said honestly. "He turned you in - properly horrified, I'm sure - for knowing *Lee*. And turned in Lee as a colonial with a firebender *contact*. Lee's already listed in our records as a waterbender, like Jinhai. It would have worked. You would have been safe." He grimaced. "Unless someone actually caught Lee, and mindbent him enough to put him in an interrogation trance. Min must have been just hoping that wouldn't happen--"

"From what I understand, Amaya's methods provide a certain measure of protection against that," Tingzhe observed.

"Methods? What?" Shirong stopped himself. "Lee's eyes are *green*. But he's...." The Dai Li let out a slow breath. "Spirits. The perfect disguise. *How?*"

"I was careful never to ask for details," Meixiang said calmly. "It's delicate. And terrifying. But it

works.”

“So I see,” Shirong said, impressed. “So it really would have worked, if Mai hadn’t walked in on us. Oma and Shu, when Lee said things went wrong around him, he didn’t say the half of it. This is a *mess*. I’ve seen ambushed ambushes that weren’t so f-” He glanced at her, and swallowed whatever he’d been about to say. “...I mean, it’s a very bad situation.”

Suyin put together what he had said with some of the nastier words she’d heard from Min, and gave him her best version of Mom’s disapproving look.

Meixiang herself shrugged, as if the near profanity was no more important than a dropped scarf. “He was ordered by the Fire Lord to pit himself against the bridge between our world and the spirits. The bad luck must spread like ink in water.”

Shirong started. “You know?”

“We’ve known who they are for weeks,” Tingzhe stated. Glanced aside into memory, and smiled wryly. “They weren’t at all what I expected.”

“You know who Lee really is?” Jinhai looked up from the lemur tumbling through his blocks. “Who?”

Shirong winced. “That’s complicated to explain....”

The waterbender gasped, and Meixiang waved Shirong back into the shadows. “You might want to stay out of sight.” She put a hand on the groaning girl’s shoulder. “Katara? Are you all right?”

“Zuko!” Katara shot up, grabbing for her waterskin. Winced, touched her head; grimaced, and looked up again. “Madame Meixiang? Professor? We need to tell the Guard; we need to tell the Earth King! Zuko’s in Ba Sing Se! He *hit* me; he’s going to be after Aang, but Aang’s not here....” She looked around. “Why are we underground?”

“That would be because we are hiding, young lady,” Tingzhe said gravely.

“From Zuko?” Katara nodded seriously. “But he’s a fugitive. If we just tell somebody-”

“No *wonder* he knocked you out,” Shirong muttered.

“You’re Dai Li!” Katara flicked the top off her waterskin, liquid coursing down her hands with deadly intent.

“Wait!” Suyin burst out. “Please! Agent Shirong came to help us!”

“Surprising as that may seem, he did,” her father said firmly. “He’s just as much a fugitive as the rest of us.” Tingzhe sighed. “We knew we might have to go into hiding. We just never dreamed it would be so soon.”

“You’re fugitives?” Katara stood, puzzled, water easing back into her skin. Momo sailed back to her shoulder with a happy chirrup. “But the Dai Li are working for the Earth King now. Why are you still in trouble for trying to help Aang?”

Shirong smacked himself in the forehead. Jinhai huddled on himself. Suyin set her jaw, and stepped between her brother and the waterbender, even as Meixiang swooped in to pick Jinhai up and murmur soft reassurances.

“Believe it or not, young lady,” Tingzhe said levelly, “not everything in this world revolves around the Avatar.” He shook his head. “And the Dai Li are *not* loyal to the Earth King. Which is *why* Shirong is a fugitive.”

“You’re not making sense,” Katara objected. “We stopped Long Feng!”

“No, you convinced the Earth King to imprison him,” Shirong corrected her. “And I wish I knew how. He may be my king, but Kuei’s always been, well, flighty....” He shrugged. “At the moment, Long Feng seems to be working on a plan to persuade the Earth King that was a terrible mistake. An innocent mistake on your part, of course; but still a mistake.”

“He’s in jail,” Katara said impatiently. “Nobody can bend their way past steel bars.”

“As long as he can get messages out, he doesn’t have to,” Shirong said bleakly. “All he needs is a sufficiently suspicious person to set up to take the blame. And I’m afraid I, and someone else I know, just happen to fit those requirements.”

Katara studied him narrowly. “Okay. Say I believe you, even a little. Long Feng’s a horrible person; I could see him trying to come up with a plot even when he knows he’s finished. Why would he luck out and frame the one Dai Li who *might* be a good guy?”

“Because I made the mistake of believing we’re supposed to protect the city, not Long Feng,” Shirong answered. “I was lucky. A friend helped me escape from the palace. And if you’d made it back there, as I’m informed you intended, you would have walked right into a trap. So would you please put that down and listen?” He drew a deep breath, and winced, hand over his ribs. “I couldn’t threaten a drowned kitten-owlet right now. Much less the Avatar’s waterbending master.”

“You’re hurt.” Some of the suspicion eased out of Katara’s face. “Amaya said there was an evil spirit....”

“There was. Thank the spirits Lake Laogai is about as far from your house as you can get and still be in the city,” Shirong sighed, sitting down on another stone bench. “We kept round-the-clock watches on all of you, praying the haima-jiao couldn’t suck the Avatar in the way the Ocean Spirit did... you have no idea how relieved I was to see that bison fly away. I’d *hoped* you all went with it.”

“Suck him in?” Katara sputtered. “The spirits needed Aang’s help! He’s the Avatar; he’s supposed to-”

“He’s supposed to protect us from the spirits, not help them slaughter us!” Shirong erupted. “You’re Water Tribe. I can only imagine what you’ve suffered. But the Earth Kingdom has lost plenty of its own. I hate the Fire Nation. I’ve hated them for decades! But what happened to the Fire Navy-” He stopped, and grimaced. “I’ve seen spirits kill. It’s a horrible way to die. So I’m only going to ask you one thing. The Ocean Spirit killed your enemies. What would you have done if it decided that wasn’t *enough*?”

“You’re more hurt than I thought,” Katara muttered, moving in with hands gloved with water. “Professor? How long has he been delirious?”

Shirong snarled. “I’m *not*-”

“Easy, Agent,” Tingzhe said firmly. “I know this must have been preying on your mind for some time. But the haima-jiao is dead, and we have more pressing matters breathing down our necks.”

“No kidding,” Katara agreed, glowing water moving over Shirong’s side. “Huh... has Amaya been

looking after you? This seems like it's healing pretty well." She frowned, and blew out a breath. "Did you see who got me away from Zuko? He's going to be back. He *never* gives up, and he's used me to get to Aang before...." She looked at the grownups, light fading from her water as she bent it back into her waterskin. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Suyin added her parents' looks, and silence, and who she'd seen carry Katara in. And gulped. "Who's Zuko?"

"You don't know?" Katara said in disbelief.

"There is no war in Ba Sing Se." Meixiang set Jinhai back down. "Those of us who know something about the current rulers of the Fire Nation are usually wiser than to say so in public." She met Suyin's gaze. "Prince Zuko, son of Ursa, and Fire Lord Ozai. Once heir to the Dragon Throne, before he was scarred and banished; a great name, and one... rumored... to take more after his uncle, General Iroh, than his father."

A great name. Scarred and banished. Suyin paled. *Lee?*

Lee was a noble, sure. But a prince?

And Uncle Mushi is... oh, boy.

"I know it's scary to think about," Katara said kindly. "But he's not as tough as he likes to think. I've taken him down before. This time, he just didn't fight fair." She smiled confidently, one fist at her hip. "So which way did he go?"

Suyin saw her parents glance at each other, and at Shirong, with the unhappy creases around their eyes that meant they'd decided to stay silent.

No one's going to tell her she's wrong.

And that was just *wrong*. Lee - Zuko didn't deserve that. "He went to save my sister," Suyin said angrily. "Jia's out at class, she doesn't know what Min did yet. Zuko brought you down here so you'd be safe, and then he went to get her! He could get hurt; he could get killed! But the Dai Li are looking for all of us, and Jia won't trust just anybody, and he's the only one who knows how to fight if they catch him...." She swiped at angry tears, and swallowed. "Why didn't you teach me to fight, Dad? I want to be out there! I want to do something!"

"I'm sorry, Suyin," her father said heavily. "We've had peace inside these walls so long... I hoped you'd never need to know."

"That's partly the anger talking, love," Meixiang said plainly, gathering Suyin into a hug. "Try not to take it too much to heart." She held her daughter close, a few breaths longer. "Waiting is always the hardest part of a fight."

"And jumping into a fight with Zuko is a good way to get hurt," Katara said fiercely. "He told you he was going to help your sister? And you *believed* him?"

That? That was just- oooh! "He said he would!" Suyin sputtered. "Zuko doesn't lie!"

"He doesn't lie? You didn't even know his *name*." Katara looked at her with pity. "He said he was going to capture the Avatar, too. You know, the last hope for the whole world? Zuko wants to capture him and bring him to the Fire Lord. The Fire Lord! The most horrible, evil person in the world! And you think someone like *that* is going to help your sister?"

The Fire Lord. Suyin felt ill. *The Fire Lord is Lee's... Zuko's father. His father burned him and cast him out.*

He made a promise. And Mom tried to help him not have to keep it. “Yes,” Suyin said, voice shaking. “Yes, he will.” Her fists clenched. “I just wish I was good enough to help him.”

“Could we go, Mom?” Jinhai tugged hopefully on Meixiang’s sleeve. “If *he’s* in trouble, shouldn’t we be in trouble too?”

“Er, well....”

Shirong snickered under his breath. “Spirits, you’ve raised a whole clan of them.”

“So it seems,” Tingzhe agreed, bemused. “Do you think they’ll execute me for treason, or sedition?”

“Neither, if Azula kills you first,” Shirong said wryly.

“Azula?” Katara’s hand went back to her waterskin. “Azula *and* Zuko? Where? We’ve got to warn people, this is bad-”

“The princess is in the palace,” Meixiang said bluntly. “And if the Dai Li haven’t taken her prisoner by now, it’s already too late. She is of the blood of Sozin, she *is* Fire... and if other Dai Li are as driven by their loyalty as you have been, Agent Shirong, they’ve walked straight into a steel-jawed dragon trap.”

Shirong tensed. “She may be of the royal family, but she’s only one bender.”

“I never thought I’d say this, but I have to agree with him,” Katara said firmly. “Even if she is in the palace, even if she’s got Mai and Ty Lee with her, they’re just three people. Sure, Toph got Appa past the Dai Li, but she’s *Toph*. Azula’s really scary, but if enough earthbenders box her in? They can take her.”

“No, they can’t,” Meixiang said quietly. “Shirong. You didn’t stay with the Dai Li. You went with Prince Zuko. And he wasn’t even *trying*.” She looked grim. “Princess Azula would have been taught to use her inner fire, especially on those whose loyalties are vulnerable. If they waver at all, if Long Feng isn’t strong enough... she’ll have them. All of them.”

Tingzhe closed his eyes, pained. “Even Min?”

“He’s been near the prince. He’s still young. I don’t know.” She bowed her head, and hugged Jinhai close. “I just don’t *know*.”

“...And so bright petals fall,” Jia concluded.

Madame Macmu-Ling frowned at her.

Jia counted syllables, and flushed, as other students tittered around her. Darn it, she knew better! She was just - distracted. And who wouldn’t be? Fire Nation strangers her parents seemed to like, the Avatar showing up on her doorstep, the *Dai Li* watching them....

And she’d left home this morning knowing her parents were packing essentials like her father’s notes, and tough clothing, and the hidden stash of coin they didn’t know she knew about. Things were going *wrong*. Who could concentrate on poetry?

You have to. You know that.

Her mother was a refugee, and her little brother was a *firebender*. If she didn't look like a perfect professor's daughter, people would look at the Wen family even harder than they were already. But if she had the right clothes, the right makeup, the right manners... then maybe, just maybe, people would think everything was all right.

Besides. She was *good* at looking perfect. Most of the time.

The giggles finally died down, into a murmur of interest. Jia dared to glance toward the door-

Oh no.

Lee. Dressed... well, reasonably decent. There were plenty of university students who looked scruffier. But they didn't come *near* Madame Macmu-Ling's classes. They didn't dare. And that scar, and he couldn't possibly know how to behave, coming as a refugee from the Lower Ring-

Lee bowed, properly, before crossing the threshold. Walked precisely along the edge of the classroom, stopped a few feet away from the stage, and bowed directly to Madame Macmu-Ling. And knelt there.

Respect to the place of learning, respect to the instructor... how did he...?

"My apologies," Lee stated deliberately. "Jia must come with me now. Tingzhe bids her home."

Jia tried not to drop her jaw.

"Five, seven, then five, syllables make a haiku," Madame Macmu-Ling said coolly. "Unkempt intruder."

Lee inclined his head again. "Are dandelions, unkempt in zephyr's laughter? So I, too, will fly."

Jia stared. The first haiku he could have figured out on the way here, sure. But the second? Referring to himself as a common flower, and Madame Macmu-Ling as the wind, a known symbol of superior nobles? And further stating he depended only on her grace to be here?

She hadn't heard anybody flatter her instructor so gracefully in *weeks*.

Madame Macmu-Ling smiled. "Jia lacks focus." She looked at Jia. "Perhaps her father's learning, could aid her better."

Jia forced a smile, and bowed her head. Slid a subtle glance Lee's way-

And if that wasn't the subtle gesture her mother had taught her meant, *get over here so I can rescue you*, she'd eat her headaddress.

She rose as Lee did, and stepped gracefully over to him so they could bow together.

"Madame Macmu-Ling," Lee said formally, "We, with your understanding, will surely depart."

Another bow, and they made their escape.

"You never said you knew poetry!" Jia accused him as they made their way through darkening streets. Scarred, scruffy, a refugee - and he'd spent all this time with Suyin and Jinhai and *never* said he could help with haiku?

“You never asked,” Lee said wryly. Shrugged, sheepish. “Uncle insisted. He said one of the best ways to defeat your opponent was to make sure they never got to the battlefield in the first place.” He waved a hand at her carefully-chosen presentation of *self*; makeup, clothing, ornaments. “Like you. The best camouflage is when nobody even realizes there’s anything to hide.”

Jia swallowed. “I - I thought you didn’t like me....”

“Because of what you said?” Lee snorted, eyes dark. “Everybody looks at the scar first. That’s why he did it.” Another shrug, only slightly bitter. “You were being an upper-class daughter. Being friendly with a Lower Ring healer’s refugee apprentice would have hurt your family’s standing. And that’s important. That’s how *you* were protecting them.” He smiled at her; faint and wry, but there. “There are all kinds of ways to fight.”

She’d never thought of it that way. At least her makeup blunted her blush. “This isn’t the way back....”

“It’s the way to where your family is,” Lee said quietly. “Do you trust me?”

She nodded, and offered her arm.

Aw. He blushes!

He was also watching. Everywhere. Which meant- She blanched, and tried not to look up.

“It’s okay.” Lee’s voice was low, but sure. “I don’t think they’ll be looking for us. Yet. Someone else is looking for me, but Ba Sing Se’s a big place.... Smile. Like everything’s normal. I know you can do this.”

Damn right I can. Jia held her head high, despite her fear, and stepped with a lady’s grace.

They wove through crowds and out of sight, slipping into a brush-maker’s shop Jia had visited a few times for fine calligraphy supplies. Not often, nothing here was less than expensive - but she didn’t stint on her classwork. Not when it was *important*.

“Ah, Healer Lee!” Brush-maker Tu traded bows with them both, before ushering them into the back. “Your uncle sent word you’d be by. Come, come....”

“I don’t think we were watched coming in,” Lee started.

“Then I’m sure you were not. You *are* Mushi’s nephew, after all.” The elderly brush-maker smiled briefly. “Don’t worry. Your uncle’s friends can handle a little danger.”

“If it were just a little, I wouldn’t *be* worried....”

One concealed door and a goodbye later, Lee was leading the pair of them through a labyrinth lit with green crystals. “You’ve been down here before?” Jia asked, curious.

“No. Someone just gave me directions.”

“Directions?” Jia eyed him, suddenly uneasy. “You don’t even have a map?”

“A tunnel map? With earthbenders around?” Lee said dryly. “You might as well ask the badger-moles.” He shrugged. “If we get lost, I know which way’s up, and you can get us out. We’ll be okay.”

Apparently so; after some time, and a few warnings about the odd people she was going to meet,

she heard a murmur of familiar voices. Swallowing, she all but flung herself around the next corner. “Mom! Dad!”

...Okay, not genteel, but it wasn't like there was anybody she had to impress. Not this time.

“You're Jia?” A Water Tribe-accented voice; Jia could still hear the surprise in it, as Mom hugged her. A girl, dark as Sokka, features definitely close enough to be his sister; though it was hard to tell her clothes were really blue, given the crystals' glow.

And now surprise was fading into anger, as the young waterbender rested a hand near her waterskin. “Well. Look who slunk in.”

Lee looked at Katara askance, and sighed. “Let me guess. I'm not going to get a thank you.”

“*Thank you?* You *hit* me, you-”

“Probably not,” Agent Shirong said wryly, sitting on a stone bench as if he'd rather not move again today, thanks. “She doesn't really believe your sister's in the palace-”

“How could Azula get into Ba Sing Se?” Katara burst out. “She *couldn't* beat the Kyoshi Warriors.” She jabbed a finger toward Lee. “*You* couldn't beat them!”

“I never *tried*,” Lee snarled back. “They were an obstacle. When they weren't anymore, I didn't have any *reason* to fight them!”

...*I'm getting over here*, Jia thought, easing out from between angry firebender and angrier waterbender. She could see Suyin keeping Jinhai out of the line of fire behind their parents, her little brother petting a lemur so its fur went sideways. But no sign of Min. Oh, no.

“Go ahead, tell yourself that,” Katara said sarcastically. “It doesn't change what happened. You *failed*. And you're *always* going to fail when you go after Aang. You know why? Because we're going to stop you!”

Lee gave her a hard, flat look, deliberately ignoring how close her hand was to her waterskin. “Are you even listening? Azula. Is in. The palace.”

“Quan could have come to his senses and ordered her captured,” Shirong offered.

“I doubt it,” Lee said dryly. “We haven't heard any explosions.”

“Explosions?” Tingzhe asked, startled.

“The royal line of Sozin,” Meixiang said quietly. “They often have a gift for lightning-bending.”

“*Lightning?*” Shirong swallowed dryly. “I know - someone said that, but...”

“She doesn't use lightning,” Katara said dismissively. “She bends this crazy blue fire-”

“She's never used lightning *on you*,” Lee said flatly. “Believe me, she can do it.”

“You attacked me in broad daylight, and you expect me to believe you?” Contempt twisted Katara's face as she jabbed a finger toward Suyin. “I'm not like your little fan over there. I know what you are!”

“I didn't have time to explain! I had to keep you from running into *a trap*-”

“Oh, of *course* it’s a trap!” Katara shot back. “So when Aang shows up to rescue me, you can finally have him in your little Fire Nation clutches!” She clawed her hands, eyes narrowed and furious.

Definitely staying over here, Jia thought, seeing the careful coldness of Lee’s face. And she’d guess that was probably all Katara saw. But she’d practiced reading hints of emotion under the careful society facades, and under the surface....

Hurt. Exhaustion. Resignation.

She’s not going to listen, Jia realized. *And he knows she’s not*.

Spirits, it was like watching a carriage wreck. She just couldn’t look away.

“You’re a terrible person, you know that?” Katara steamed on. “Always following us, hunting the Avatar, trying to capture the world’s last hope for peace! But what do you care? You’re the Fire Lord’s *son*. Spreading war and violence and hatred is in your blood!”

Jia’s jaw dropped as Lee’s fists clenched. *The Fire Lord’s-?*

Amaya’s scruffy little scarred apprentice, who knew poetry and manners and could barely hold a dinner conversation even if his life depended on it... was a prince?

The girls in class would never believe this.

Chapter End Notes

My apologies to Maiko fans. I love Mai. She is Really Cool. But that relationship has always left me with a deep and abiding, “huh?” Zuko was banished at 13, left chasing rumors and then the Avatar for 3 years - and he picks right back up with a girl he knows is loyal to the sister that tried to kill him? Does not compute. But Azula being sneaky, sadistic and squicky enough to set up a “kissing cousins” relationship to hold over them later at the worst possible moment? Oh, yeah.

About Roku, Sozin, and bloodlines... a couple of things jumped out at me. 1) We have no idea how many kids Roku might have had. 2) Sozin seems the type to think “friends close, enemies closer” is excellent advice. 3) There’s a consistent Cain and Abel theme running through the Fire Nation. Sozin and Roku; Ozai and Iroh; Azula and Zuko. The only odd man out is Azulon. So... why not Ilah as the “good firebender” of that pairing? Iroh’s definitely powerful enough to justify a heritage from Roku, in my opinion. (And it handles that whole “if Zuko has to choose between good and evil, how do we explain Iroh?” plothole. Also... the mind-twists Azulon would have put his kids through knowing whose grandsons they are, ouch.) And no, Zuko has no idea who Ta Min’s husband was. Someone (I’m looking at a certain Dragon of the West) conveniently neglected to mention it.

Also, I’ve been asked about the Sun Warriors. This, unfortunately, is a case where the writer Knows Too Much. While I did love that episode (dragons! Indiana Jones problem-solving!), the fact that the canon Sun Warriors are supposed to be some variant on Aztec, when the Fire Nation today looks like a cross between Early Modern Japan and Imperial China, *hurts my brain*. On top of that - read up on the Aztecs, and exactly how they worshiped the sun and fire. If you can, without tossing your cookies. Let’s just say, they have a lot less in common with The Emperor’s New Groove and a

lot more in common with Aliens vs. Predator. You don't want me to go there. Trust me.

And I am sincerely trying not to bash Katara. Just to write her as the show portrayed her - stubborn, thinking with her heart, and stuck on "Water Tribe ways are the best". Much thanks to Laryna6, for comments on Min that helped me get the poor guy's motivations out in the open!

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Loyalty breaking doesn't kill you instantly. Recall that Iroh was able to order a retreat, and make sure it was happening, before he collapsed.

It's implied that firebenders have a tendency to intermarry heavily, given they consider themselves superior. Zuko and Mai aren't just reacting to one relative in common; they're reacting to the fact that if they have one shared branch of a family tree, they may have more unsuspected, and that could be a problem.

Warning, some disturbing imagery near the end of the chapter.

They know. They all know, now. Grimly, Zuko looked up, braced for the hatred Jinhai's parents would rightly feel-

Except... he didn't see it. Just concern, and a bit of motherly worry on Meixiang's face.

"Katara blew your cover when she woke up," Shirong shrugged, carefully casual. "I think we're mostly over the shock."

Over it? Zuko thought in disbelief. *You know who I am, and you still-*

"How can you say that?" Katara blazed. "Don't you know what the Fire Nation has done to the Earth Kingdom? To the whole world?"

"Would you stop worrying about the world for a minute?" Zuko said, exasperated. "We need to concentrate on right here, right now!"

"Is that how you live with yourself? How you live with lying to these people?" Katara waved an angry hand at the Wens. "Just tell yourself the past doesn't matter, I'll just be someone else for a while? Well, you're not! You're a monster! And nothing you do will ever change that!"

"Says the *thief*!" Zuko snarled back. "Says the ignorant peasant girl who would have left me to die in a North Pole blizzard!"

"After you *kidnapped* Aang-"

"*I had my orders!*" Zuko made himself breathe. Made himself not close his fists; the fire was crackling inside him, *begging* to be set free... and he couldn't. He *couldn't*. "I've never tried to kill you!" *Breathe. Breathe, damn it!* "Just - stop. *Stop*. Give me a minute, and listen. You're angry at me because I want to capture Aang? Fine. Azula wants to *kill* him. Would you consider that maybe, just *maybe*, neither of us wants that to happen?"

"It's not going to happen," Katara said levelly. "I'm going to stop you."

It didn't make sense. He knew what he'd said. What was she hearing?

Shirong cleared his throat. "What I think the prince is trying to say," the agent said blandly,

regarding the waterbender with narrowed green eyes, "is that we're all trying *not* to get killed by Azula, and it might be easier if we all tried that together."

"He told you Azula's trying to kill him?" Katara said in disbelief. "Low, Zuko. That's low. Even for you. How could you say that about your *sister*?"

She might have said more. Zuko couldn't hear it. *She doesn't believe me. No one believes me.*

Why won't anyone believe me?

Fist clenched, he drove the fire and fury into stone.

"Oh dear," Iroh murmured, rounding the corner onto crackling flame and shattering crystals. Harsher words sprang to mind; he kept them off his lips with a determined effort. Unleashing some of Jeong Jeong's favorite Army curses wouldn't solve anything.

But it would make me feel better, Iroh admitted to himself, watching Zuko drive one more fiery punch into the cavern wall before the young man stopped, shaking. The Wens and Shirong were between the children and any flying fragments, Katara had water wrapped around her hands and an angry look on her face...

And his nephew was not looking at the Water Tribe girl. Deliberately.

Regarding Katara with a wary eye, Iroh moved into Zuko's field of vision, and wrapped his nephew in a hug.

"M sorry." A bare whisper in his ear, almost a hiccup of pain. "She won't *listen*."

Katara had done far more than that, somehow. *I should not have stayed so long at the teashop*, Iroh thought unhappily. He'd thought it worth the risk, to try to send warnings to the generals of the Council of Five, and listen for word on what Azula might have set in motion. And more than worth it, for what he had learned from the White Lotus of the spirit-snare his nephew was in. But nothing was worth this. "Diplomacy is not one of your better skills," Iroh said clearly. "I will explain matters." He let go, and swung the pack he'd carried off his shoulder. "It is late, and we are all tired. Perhaps some dinner, and rest, would do us good."

"...Not hungry."

That, I doubt, Iroh thought dryly. "Then you will not mind helping the children with theirs, yes? Come; let us separate the dishes." He bent to help his nephew, but kept a steely gaze on Katara.

Not one word, little waterbender. Not one. Or I will deal with you.

Whatever she saw in his face made her blanch, and step back.

Good.

Suyin took a gulp of breath, and stepped forward to lend a hand. "So... do we have rice, or noodles?"

"Noodles," Zuko muttered, shoulders slumped.

"Well come on, Jinhai hates it when noodles get cold..."

Meixiang nodded encouragement, and smiled at her youngest son before gently shoving him off Jia's way. Squeezed her husband's hand as the children took their share of dinner into the next chamber; a subtle gesture Iroh recognized from his own marriage. *It'll be all right, love. Trust me.*

"Zuko," Tingzhe said levelly, before the young man could follow. "Remember, I heard you out before I made my decision. I had to hear her out as well." He gave Katara a measured look. "I think your uncle and I will have quite a bit to say to the young lady."

Iroh hid a smile. *Perhaps the situation is not as grave as I feared.*

Though grave enough, from the way Tingzhe carefully raised stone to block the tunnel after them, thick enough that the adults would be able to speak in private, even if Zuko cupped an ear to the wall.

"You're letting your kids go off with *him*?" Katara said in disbelief. "You saw what he just did!"

"Young lady," Tingzhe said dryly, "I've seen a great many teenage benders lose their temper. I trust him far more than I trust *you*."

There was a subtle twist of venom under the cool tone that made Iroh raise a startled brow, and eye the waterbender even more warily. "Precisely what did you say to my nephew, Miss Katara?"

"Before or after she called him a monster?" Shirong was watching Katara like a hawk-eagle. "Did you leave him to die at the North Pole?"

"Aang would never let that happen!" Katara glared at the Dai Li agent, obviously tempted to slap him with a water whip.

"So you would have." Shirong shook his head, grim. "And you're the one teaching the Avatar waterbending? We're doomed."

"A monster," Iroh said, very quietly. Conscious of a growing rage he had not felt in... a very long time.

One of my men was ambushed, where he expected no enemy... calm. Stay calm.

"Well, first she accused him of lying about Azula being in the palace," Shirong said, matter of fact. "Then she called him a failure who couldn't even beat Kyoshi Warriors, then lying again about Azula lightning-bending, then accused him of using her to set a trap for Aang, then... well, I'd rather not go into what she said about your brother, General, and Zuko being his father's son... have I missed anything, Madam Wen?"

"Not yet," Meixiang said, coolly furious.

"I see," Iroh said, still quiet. *She is Water Tribe. But I had thought the Avatar would have... stay calm.*

"But he didn't crack until she called him a liar for saying Azula wanted to kill him," Shirong finished. "Does Fire Lord Ozai know Princess Azula's tried to kill the crown prince?"

"Insofar as I can determine, my brother has encouraged it," Iroh stated, never taking his gaze off the waterbender. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Meixiang raise a hand to cover her horror and rage, and Tingzhe draw her close for comfort. But Katara...

Katara stared back at him, unrepentant. Defiant, as if she were facing a true enemy. "Oh, come on!

Even if she weren't his sister - and she is! - that doesn't make sense. Why would the Fire Lord let anyone kill his precious son?"

"Because if Azula does so, she will have proven she is precisely the heir Fire Lord Ozai wishes," Iroh said in a voice like iron. "Cunning, strong, and ruthless. And loyal *only* to him. My brother despises Zuko for his kindness, his wish to see the Fire Nation whole and at peace, instead of eternally at war. But his rule of our people is not absolute, no matter what he wishes the rest of the world to believe. If he were seen to raise his hand directly against Zuko, after failing to slay him in combat, all the great names would fear for their own heirs, and Ozai's power would be damaged. Yet if he allows Zuko to live... The Fire Sages are not fools. They would not choose Azula as the next Fire Lord, no matter what Ozai's will might state. Not if they had another choice. But if Zuko should die facing the Avatar, as so many of the Fire Nation have died..." He shook his head. "Who would question who truly dealt the blow? The Avatar, after all, is also a firebender."

"He'd do that to Aang?" Wide-eyed, Katara swallowed. "I don't care what Toph says. You're all monsters!"

Tingzhe tensed. "Now, see here, young lady-!"

Iroh held up a warning hand. "Professor. What we have here is a failure to understand one another's cultures."

"A failure?" Tingzhe said, incredulous. "She just called your entire nation monstrous! And while I might say that about some of your *army*..."

"By the standards of the Water Tribes," Iroh stated, "we are."

Tingzhe eyed him, considering that. Shirong blinked, surprised, and settled back onto his bench to listen. Meixiang paled. "Amaya never said..."

"Amaya's got something wrong with her," Katara snapped. "Training a *Fire Nation* apprentice? What is she thinking? Who knows why he *really* helped Toph, it sure wasn't for Aang-"

"*Be. Quiet.*" Just a touch of fire's rage. The merest hint of smoke. Any more, and... well, Iroh was certain he would regret it. Later. "Amaya has learned something every Avatar was meant to learn. Something it seems Aang has *not* learned. Nor have you. The four nations are *different*. Not only in their bending, but in their culture. And most important of all, in how they define right, wrong, and responsibility."

"Right and wrong don't change!" Katara flung at him. "It doesn't matter who you are!"

"Ah. But who is assigned the *blame* for a wrong, does change," Iroh said plainly. "And that is why you call us all monsters."

"Because you *are*!"

"No," Iroh said firmly. "Very few of us are. Zhao, yes; my brother... Azula. But Zuko? No. My nephew is not, and has never been, a monster. Yet to you who are Water Tribe, that does not matter. In the tribe, it is the community which bears the guilt or credit for an individual's actions. When Chief Hakoda sinks a Fire Nation ship, you all have won a victory; when one of your warriors falls to a firebending soldier, you all feel shamed. And the tribe is your source of right and wrong; right is what benefits the tribe, and wrong is what harms it. So harm done to others, who stand outside the tribe, does not truly matter. Which is why the Northern Tribe saw the Ocean strike, and cheered a great victory... and never, ever, felt compassion for those struck down."

"Oh," Shirong said softly. "Spirits, no wonder he was worried it could happen again. If the haimajiao had... oh, *damn*." He eyed Katara with a look of wary dread, as if calculating exactly how far he could get from her before he'd have to start tunneling through walls.

"How can you say that?" Katara gasped. "I'm not evil! Not like the Fire Nation."

"Says the young lady we have followed across the world as she lied, cheated, and stole from those she passed," Iroh said dryly.

"The pirates stole that waterbending scroll, and you know it!" Katara planted fists on her hips. "Aang *needed* it."

"My nephew needs his honor," Iroh observed, looking at her askance. "Yet you do not seem to consider that reason enough for him." He sighed. "But then, you would not. You consider Aang one of your tribe, even if he is an airbender... and my nephew is not of your tribe, and so an enemy."

"You say that like you don't think he's done anything wrong," Katara fumed.

"No!" Iroh slashed a hand across, trailing only a hint of heat-shimmer in its wake. "Never have I said that! But you would hold my nephew guilty of *Ozai's* crimes! And Azulon's! And Sozin's! You would hold him guilty of the decimation of your people, and the extinction of the Air Nomads! And that, he *did not do*!"

Katara stared at him, still angry... but also confused, if wide blue eyes spoke truly. "But he's the Fire Lord's *son*."

"And I am the Fire Lord's brother," Iroh said levelly. "And in the Fire Nation - and yes, the Earth Kingdom as well - no young man is held guilty of what his *father* has done." He spread empty hands. "I know it is foreign to you. But grant us this grace, for Zuko truly did mean you well, no matter how little he explained. Grant us the honor of trying to understand."

"You think I don't understand?" Angry tears filled her eyes. "Do you know what this war has put me through? Me, personally? The Fire Nation took my mother from me!"

A harsh loss for any child, Iroh knew. But she was the Avatar's teacher. She had to be able to look beyond her own needs, or the world was doomed. "And so has my nephew lost his mother, to Ozai's schemes," Iroh replied. "So did I lose my son, in the siege of Ba Sing Se. You are not alone in your grief. A century of war has harmed us all."

"And you think the *only* one who's guilty is the Fire Lord?" Katara shook her head, tears still streaming. "How can you live like that? How does anybody stop a murderer, if he knows his family's not going to pay for it?" She gave him a venomous look. "Oh, that's right. You *haven't*!"

"No, I have not," Iroh acknowledged. "I do not believe I could defeat Ozai. Not alone. And if I did, our people would only see a brother slaying a brother for power. And the war would go on. For true justice to be done, the Fire Lord must be defeated by someone else."

"Justice?" Katara swiped at her tears, and straightened, looking at him. "How can you talk about justice when the war needs to *stop*?"

So. Mention defeating the Fire Lord, and she listens, Iroh thought wryly. "Because without justice, the war will not stop. Even if the Fire Lord is dead."

Katara drew in a breath, scowling-

"He's right, you know," Tingzhe said plainly. "That's what history tells us happened, when Avatar Kyoshi faced Chin the Conqueror."

"Really?" Shirong put in. Sounding only normally interested, if you didn't catch the sharpness in green eyes. "I've never known as much about that part of history as I'd like to have."

"No, I'd imagine that wasn't a time Long Feng encouraged his men to learn about. Not since he took power." Tingzhe clasped his hands behind him, a professor calculating how best to fit what he knew to his audience. "Avatar Aang implied that you know of Chin the Conqueror?"

"Aang got put on trial for Chin's murder," Katara said heatedly. "Avatar Kyoshi... appeared... and told us about it. But it was self-defense!"

"Hmm." Tingzhe nodded. "But did she tell you that severing Kyoshi Island from the mainland, and Chin's death, were not enough to stop the war?"

Katara looked aside. "She... didn't have much time."

"Then I'll try to be brief, as well."

Meixiang smothered a laugh.

"Yes, I can be brief, from time to time," the professor said dryly, giving his wife a sidelong look. "It's not as though she's paying for the lecture... where was I?"

"Justice," Iroh stated, hiding his own chuckle. How many generations of students had Tingzhe fooled with that absent air? "And Chin the Conqueror."

"Ah, yes. Justice." Tingzhe nodded once. "In the Earth Kingdom, and from what I know the Fire Nation as well, justice is done not by the decisions of the tribe, but by having a system of laws, and Guards to enforce those laws. Now, the laws themselves are not always fair, given they are made by rulers like the Earth King, or the Fire Lord..."

Iroh inclined his head, admitting the point.

"But in some respects they are more fair, for they are not decided by the chieftain of the tribe and his most powerful followers gathering to state what they will do *this time*. They are the laws, and everyone knows them, and the consequences of breaking them." Tingzhe raised a finger, stabbing air. "As Chin's soldiers broke laws, to follow him. Yet they could, and did, argue that the laws they broke were unfair. That events, and striving to give their families a better life, had left them no choice."

"So... what did Kyoshi do?" Katara asked warily. "If the laws are supposed to be the same for everyone - they had to be punished."

"From what I've studied, that is one of the reasons we have an Avatar," Tingzhe said plainly. "As they do not truly belong to any one nation, so they are not bound by its laws. And it's a very unwise sovereign who crosses them without good cause."

"Unfortunately, Sozin thought he had one," Iroh sighed. "I am curious as well. What did she do?"

"From my studies? One of the first things she did was to seize all Chin's records," Tingzhe said plainly. "After all, if Chin himself had reason to think a soldier had acted brutally, and just hadn't gotten around to doing something about it..." He shrugged. "The Avatar did many things. But one key thing she did, which Avatar Aang should think about, was try to uncover why the war

happened in the first place. Who thought they had been wronged, and who believed they had something to gain. And that was one of the reasons she created the Dai Li."

Katara's jaw dropped. "*Avatar Kyoshi...?*"

If it wouldn't have completely shattered Tingzhe's spell of words, Iroh would have hugged the man. Trust an earthbender to wait, and listen, until he found the one weak spot that would take a fortress down.

Not that Iroh believed the teachings of Katara's childhood had been defeated so easily. But she was at least *listening*.

"You see, one of the reasons Chin got as far as he did, was, to be blunt, the forty-sixth Earth King himself," Tingzhe went on. "The man was a tyrant. And a bit of a brute, besides."

"Hey!" Shirong objected.

"Divine right or no, that's what the records indicate," Tingzhe said practically. "We can only hope Kuei never takes after him... hmm. Where was I? Ah, yes. The Dai Li." He nodded. "I must admit, most of what I know about the Water Tribe is from books, or speaking with Amaya, or a few of the other waterbenders who... used to work with the fishing fleets. But I have the impression that most items you make and use do not last a full century?"

"So what's wrong with that?" Katara shrugged. "We make what we need. It doesn't have to last forever."

"My dear young lady, there's nothing wrong with that," Tingzhe replied. "But it means your tribes do not encounter one of the hazards more settled people often face. The chief of those being ninety-nine-year spirits."

"Ninety-nine what?" Katara echoed doubtfully.

"When something is used by people for a long time, it can develop a life of its own," Meixiang explained. "Sometimes they're just playful and quiet; they move when no one's watching, or make noises no one can explain. But sometimes... they can try to kill people."

"Among his other offenses, the Earth King had encouraged the preservation of ancient artifacts *without* making sure there were enough ceremonies being held to placate hostile spirits," Tingzhe stated. "The peasants revolted, and destroyed many artifacts that represented the old government. By the time Kyoshi was called in... well. Eventually, there was a compromise. The Earth King agreed to allow peasants more of a voice, and Avatar Kyoshi trained a group of elite earthbenders to protect the cultural heritage of Ba Sing Se. Which meant, in a large part, protecting Ba Sing Se's citizens from the spirits *created* by that heritage."

"I've always preferred that part of the job," Shirong said wistfully. "It may be dirty and exhausting and dangerous as walking straight into the lake serpent's jaws, but it's for our people." He sighed. "What went wrong, Professor? We only wanted to protect our city."

"This is just a guess on my part... I would say it was the assassination of the royal family, twenty years ago," Tingzhe replied. "You likely weren't an agent then-"

"New recruit," Shirong said simply. "I'd only been in a few months. I still have the scars." He frowned. "Though they haven't been bothering me as much, lately..."

"Whether we like it or not, the royal family is a center of spiritual power," Tingzhe informed

Katara. "When all but Kuei were assassinated - well, one four-year-old boy wasn't enough to hold the balance. Things... broke loose. The moon went dark. Spirits were roused. Chaos and destruction swept the streets. Personally, I am alive today because I *am* a strong earthbender. To fight off spirits, you either must be a strong bender or have a will so determined it verges on legend. Ba Sing Se stands today because Long Feng rescued Kuei, rallied the remnants of the Dai Li, and beat back the darkness by main force."

Silence. Iroh dared to breathe. *Spirits, just let her think-*

"You see? They're evil!" Katara flung up her hands. "Assassinating people. Unleashing spirits. They never change!"

"What on earth makes you think the assassins were Fire Nation?" Tingzhe said dryly.

"Because that's what they do! That's..." Katara ground to a halt, looking at the three city-dwellers. "It... wasn't them?"

"The assassins were Earth Kingdom," Shirong said plainly. "From Taku. The Council retaliated by cutting off military aid... now they're gone, and the Fire Nation has Pohuai Stronghold to anchor that part of their conquest." He smirked. "Your Aang's just lucky Prince Zuko managed to get him out of there in one piece. Admiral Zhao was no pushover, from the reports. And frankly, the Yu Yan archers scare half our army to death. That raid must have taken guts."

"Nice try," Katara said at last. "But I've never heard of this stronghold, and Zuko's never rescued anybody. Aang would have told us if there was good in somebody like *him*."

"Apparently not," Iroh murmured. Held up a hand, before she could protest further. "I do not ask that you believe us." *Since you apparently will not.* "I only ask that, when you can, you ask Avatar Aang what truly happened with Zhao, and the frozen frogs."

"I will ask him," Katara said fiercely. "But I don't think you'll like what Aang tells me."

"If he speaks the truth, it will be more than enough," Iroh said levelly. *And if he does not....*

Perhaps it was only a child's confusion at being aided by an enemy. He hoped so. It had been almost two thousand years since the White Lotus had been called on to take... drastic measures, to deal with an Avatar. By all the spirits, he did not wish that responsibility to fall on his shoulders. Not with Sozin's legacy looming over him. Not with the boy truly the last of his kind. Even if his feeling was right, and the spirits truly had scattered the airbending gift in the folk of other nations to preserve the balance... Aang was the last trained airbender. Rebuilding the forms without him would take centuries.

Agni, let there be another option.

But if the world was not so kind... he had joined his nephew's quest for more than one reason.

Agni, be merciful. I would not enjoy the irony of carrying out my brother's wishes.

Still. He had always known the will of the spirits could be merciless, when mere humans upset the balance. He'd tried to shield Zuko from the worst of that cold rage, even as he had trained Zuko to seek the honor found in a balanced world.

Though he'd never expected to help train two elements. Which was far more unsettling than he ever wished Zuko would have to know. Not because his nephew was a waterbender... but because of what that second element implied.

Yue said the spirits themselves are uncertain what should happen. But it would seem the Moon - and Agni as well - is willing to consider some... very old options.

Options he would never have known of, had he not asked his contacts to consult the records of the White Lotus. Very few people kept even fragments of stories of the time before there had been an Avatar.

Iroh sighed, and shut dark thoughts away. "It is late, and we have had a busy day," he said kindly. "It would be best if we remained here, where Azula is unlikely to find us. Tomorrow, I can send you to people who can help you reach Aang. Will that suffice?"

"Just keep your nephew away from me," Katara said shortly.

Iroh smiled wryly. *I doubt that will be a problem.* "Dinner?"

Zuko felt the eyes on him as the other children ate, and tried not to shrink into a corner. "I'm sorry," he said, voice low. "I have... a really bad temper. I know that's not an excuse. I didn't mean to scare you. I just..." He looked down, ashamed. "My father, Azula... they're always in control. Always. Me, I - I lose it. Mom had to get after me, all the time..." He swallowed hard. "It's not right. What I did. But - Mom taught me, if I couldn't hang on anymore... hit something that wasn't alive. Break something. Instead of hurt somebody." He made himself eat, even if it tasted like ashes. Who knew when things would get back to normal. If they ever would.

So what's normal? a dark part of him snorted. *Running for your life sure seems to be. Having someplace to go, where people even want you a little... that's not normal. You know better.*

He did. That was the awful part. For a few weeks, he'd been able to... rest. To think that maybe the past didn't matter, and he could make something better of his life.

Right. Like the Fire Lord would ever let you be that lucky. Like the spirits ever would.

Focus. Eat. Survive.

And try not to feel, as dreams crumbled.

"So this is just you?" Suyin asked carefully. "Mom said so, but... Jinhai won't...?"

"What? No!" Zuko exclaimed, startled away from gloom. "No, this is just... my problem. Uncle says it runs in the family, but you know he's kind... no. Jinhai. If you want to know what to be, watch your father. He's a good man. You pay attention, you listen to him - you'll be a better person than I am. He's your *father*. I'm just your teacher." *And the way things are going, pretty soon I won't even be that. It's not fair.*

"But... your father's a really bad guy," Jinhai whispered, staring at his empty bowl.

"...I know that now." Zuko rinsed his own bowl, set it aside. "I guess - I've known that for a long time." Though without the Wens, without the people he'd met with Amaya, he wasn't sure he would have found the courage to admit it. How could he say what was *wrong* with his family when he'd never seen anything right? Just going on a *feeling*, a sickening dread that the way his father and sister and himself interacted was just *not right*....

He'd been trained to deal with facts, not feelings. Mercy, pity - those were for the weak.

But Uncle's not weak. He faced Azula. He got us here. He kept me alive.

"What my father's doing is wrong," Zuko admitted, interlacing his fingers so his hands gripped each other. He wouldn't raise angry flame that way. Maybe a little smoke, but no fire. "But he's the Fire Lord. I can't stop him." *I can't disobey my orders. Even if I want to.* "All I can do is try to be like Mom, and Uncle. Help people, not hurt them."

Only Mom killed a Fire Lord.

But he didn't *know* that. Not for sure. And Azulon wasn't *her* father.

"Except when you're punching little witches," Jia smirked. And gave him an arch glance before he could sputter. "Oh, don't look like that. She deserved it."

"But - you don't even know-" Zuko started.

"I know enough." Jia tossed her head, upper-class haughty with just a touch of wicked humor. "I've seen her before, with a dozen different faces. The queen flutter-hornet, pretty as a picture. And vicious as a scorpion-viper, when she doesn't get what she wants. Only most people don't see it, because she almost always does. Sometimes by working for it; a lot of girls like that do work, hard. But most of the time? Because she's *Daddy's* girl, and Daddy's someone *very important*." Jia snorted. "She's not really a peasant, is she?"

"I don't know," Zuko admitted. "It's not like we ever sat down and traded family trees." He had to smirk, just a little, at the thought. "I'd be throwing fire at her, she'd be throwing ice at me... she buried me under a whole pillar of it, once. That hurt."

"See? Fair's fair," Jia nodded.

"Though that was after I knocked her out," Zuko shrugged.

"Um...."

"Which was after she froze me in ice," Zuko went on, trying not to grin at Jia's increasingly dubious look. It was funny. Kind of. "Which was after... well, a lot of stuff."

The two sisters traded glances. "*How* many times have you two been fighting?" Suyin asked.

"Lost count," Zuko shrugged. "We chased her and her friends from the South Pole all the way north. That took a few months. It was a lot."

Another pair of glances. Jia shook her head, and stood; took a stance, and casually swept down the wall between them and the adults. "Mom!"

"Jia?" Meixiang stepped into the opening, one brow raised.

"Remember that talk you gave us about what kind of boys to drag home?" Jia jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "He's the guy you *warned* us about."

"I didn't do anything!" Zuko protested. Trying not to look past Meixiang to Katara. Who hated him anyway, so it wasn't like it mattered... but he *hadn't*.

"No, of course you didn't." Meixiang smiled, bittersweet. "Sweet, deadly, and broken. Your uncle's going to have to beat them off with a stick."

Which made exactly *no* sense. Though Uncle looked amused. Never a good sign. And Tingzhe

looked mildly horrified, which was even worse.

No help there, Zuko judged, and eyed Shirong. "What the heck are they talking about?"

"You don't know?" Shirong eyed Iroh in turn. "At sea since he was thirteen?"

"With very little time allowed in port," Uncle admitted.

"So, clueless," Shirong concluded.

"I very much fear he is, yes."

"*He* is standing right here, Uncle," Zuko said warily. "And *he* would like an explanation."

"Of course, nephew." Iroh folded his hands in his sleeves with suspicious serenity. "Now let me see, I am sure I have a proverb for this..."

"Never mind," Zuko winced. "I don't want to know."

Shirong's cough sounded suspiciously like, *clueless*.

"Nasty cough," Zuko said wryly. Waved a hand toward a lamp tucked into a niche against the wall; a hint of gold light to liven the green glow from wall crystals. "Get over here so I can check you."

"I already-" Katara looked at him, and glanced at a no longer smiling Iroh, and shut her mouth. "...Not like you know what you're doing, anyway."

Ignore idiot waterbender, Zuko told himself firmly, already shaping the small flame. Standing so Katara couldn't get a good look at his eyes; with luck, the background green light had kept her from realizing there was anything different about him, or Uncle. He'd fought her enough to know she was cow-pig-headed stubborn, not *stupid*. See green where she knew it should be gold, and she'd start asking questions. So far she didn't know he and Lee were the same person, and he wanted to keep it that way as long as he could. You never knew when you might need another tile up your sleeve.

But that's not the real reason, is it? Zuko admitted to himself. *I just... I want something she hasn't spit on. Something that's mine. Something I did right.*

"It's okay," he said under his breath, as Shirong braced himself. "I've done this before. You were just a little... out of it." The firebender smiled wryly. "This is just checking, not trying to patch you back together before you bleed to death. It won't hurt."

"So you say." Shirong leaned back against comforting stone, eyeing gold and green and violet with a speculative look. "I've seen those colors before... oh." He laughed, apparently surprising even himself. "Oh, that was *inspired*. No one would *ever*..." He glanced at Iroh. "Your idea?"

"My nephew's," Iroh smiled. "It has served us well."

Zuko made himself ignore the banter, the way he was ignoring angry blue eyes boring into the back of his neck. Only the fire mattered. The fire, and the wounded chi it was mending.

Move slowly, Amaya's voice murmured in memory. *Quick healing is good. It's what you need on the battlefield, or with accidents that can kill in heartbeats. But once the worst is mended... slow. Go slow, and wait, and listen. Don't force wounds to heal. Let your patient's body and spirit tell you what they need.*

Zuko held healing fire against scarred skin, and waited, eyes closed. There was the fire in his hands, and there the resistance of healing wounds, like dull copper knots. And there...

That's it. That's what Shirong was talking about.

He had to be careful, wisps of fire touching gentle as a breath, or everything blurred into one flow of energies. But when he held still, and waited... Fine threads of chi led outward from Shirong's skin, subtle as spiderweb on a dewy morning; thicker, somehow more *practiced*, about hands and feet. The threads sank into earth and stone, rooting the Dai Li agent like a young sapling; drawing strength from earth, but frail enough that uncaring hands could tear it away. And it had been torn. Large swathes of that web trembled in the shimmer of fire; tattered and broken, scarred by spirit claws.

Benders need their element. Zuko swallowed hard, thinking of the strength he always felt around open flame. Of the sea barges for imprisoned earthbenders, and the dry cells Uncle had told him about for captured waterbenders. *I'm going to be sick.*

No. He was *not* going to throw up in front of Katara. He wasn't going to give the little idiot the satisfaction.

Just breathe, Zuko told himself firmly. *One thing at a time. You can't change what happened. But you can fix this. Here. Now. You can give Shirong a chance.*

He leaned into the flames, adding their strength to injured strands one gentle stroke at a time. Over here to nurture, and over there to draw jagged ends together and splint, and there...

Huh. That's interesting.

Some of those new, faint threads of chi weren't seeking stone. They reached up and out instead, almost as if...

Deep in the flame, Zuko smiled. *It's night. Why don't you come over here?*

Wisps touched flame, and he felt Shirong start. Zuko made one more slow pass, and nodded, releasing fire and blinking his way back to the world. "Don't use the gloves unless you have to," he told the startled agent, pressing the lamp into his hands. "But move a few pebbles, once in a while. What the haima-jiao did to your chi... it's kind of like if you broke your leg. We've got it set straight, and it's healing. You don't want to put a lot of weight on it. But if you don't put a little on it... even resting, the bone won't get strong the way it should. So just be careful."

He glanced carefully over his shoulder, to see Katara watching him. Scowling. No surprise there. But behind the scowl...

She saw something she didn't expect, Zuko realized. *What? She's a healer.*

Though he didn't really care. Just as long as she was watching *him*. And not Jinhai, who'd been looking at the little lamp with open longing.

We're going to have to do something about that. We can't stay down here too long. Uncle and I can take it, but Jinhai could panic. And if he does that while Katara's here - not good.

Anywhere but Ba Sing Se, with anyone but Katara, he wouldn't have worried about it. But he'd tracked the Avatar's little band for *months*. Outside of Toph, they couldn't keep a secret to save their lives. No way was he going to put Jinhai's life in their hands.

Toph. Oh no. "Where are the others?" Zuko asked abruptly, looking at Katara.

"Like you care." She shot a glance at Iroh. "You said you'd keep him away from me."

"It is a fair question," Iroh said mildly. "You do not wish to be bait to lure the Avatar, which is wise. But Azula will not hesitate to use your brother or young Toph, if she can. Are they safe?"

"Do you think I'd stay here if they weren't?" Katara challenged him.

Yes. Because you're an idiot. Zuko gritted his teeth and kept quiet while Iroh made soothing conversation. What your opponent *didn't* say could be the most important thing of all.

She didn't say they were safe. She doesn't know.

The tricky part was, did she not know because the Avatar's little group had been their usual feckless selves and scattered to the four winds when they thought they were safe? Or had she *thought* they were somewhere they'd be okay, only now she was actually putting together what it meant that Azula was in the city?

Damn it, I need to know!

Zuko sat on his temper, and made himself think. No. *He* didn't need to know. *Uncle* needed to know, and Iroh was currently talking the Water Tribe girl into picking out one of the many futons Uncle's Pai Sho-playing friends had stocked this little underground house with. If anyone could get it out of her, Iroh would.

Finding his own corner, *away* from everyone else - no way did he want a repeat of that mess with Huojin - Zuko curled up and closed his eyes. And tried not to panic.

Azula's in the city. With Mai, and Ty Lee. And Long Feng ready to eat out of her hand.

And Amaya was still in her clinic, counting on Dai Li calculations of her usefulness to keep her away from Azula's eye.

Which is going to last as long as it takes for Long Feng to figure out Azula owns him, Zuko thought bleakly. Then he'll be grabbing for anyone else he can feed her, to keep her away from his throat.

Which might take... oh, another two days. Depending on how cranky his sister was feeling. Enough time for Iroh to convince Amaya to do the smart thing, and hide. He hoped.

It's her life. It's her right to risk it for what she cares about.

Which didn't stop Zuko from wanting to knock Master Amaya out and carry her down here like a sack of potato-chokes. He'd bet almost anything *Uncle* was tempted. And... maybe somebody from the Water Tribe would have done that. Zuko didn't know. But they couldn't do that to her.

Step between her and her loyalty? No. No way.

He'd done what he could. Saved what, *who*, he could. Now Azula would do whatever she was planning, and they had to be ready. Meaning they *had* to have clear heads.

Which meant sleep. Oh, joy.

Haven't had nightmares for at least a few days, Zuko thought with bleak humor. Guess I'm overdue.

He needed sleep. He knew that. As surely as he knew the night was going to be one long parade of horrors.

Survive, Zuko told himself flatly. *You don't have to like it. You just have to do it.*

Determined, he tried to think of nothing at all.

I wonder if Mai pulled it off...

She had to give the Dai Li points for skill, Mai thought, curled feverish in bed under as many blankets as she could pile on. Stone slid aside from her wall almost soundlessly, opening just enough of a door for Min and Agent Quan to enter.

"...You look awful."

Nothing but honesty in the young man's face. Plus a little guilt. "I'll live," Mai said harshly.

"Will you?" Quan asked levelly.

"Stomach flu-"

"For your sake, I hope the Fire Princess believes that," Quan said plainly. "Will you?"

She picked up a ceramic cup of water from the stool beside her bed in a trembling hand. Managed a sip, and set it back down. "I'm still alive. And I'm not a firebender." Mai leaned back against pillows, shivering. "I have a chance."

"...You could die." Min looked almost as pale as she was. "You could *die*, just from..."

"Reclaiming my loyalty." Mai let her eyes slip closed a moment. "Yes."

"Then *why*-?"

"Because my honor required it." She looked at Min directly. "And my prince asked me to save a child's life."

The young earthbender had to look down.

"He doesn't ask for much," Mai mused. "Zuko never has. Like his mother. You would have liked Lady Ursa. I did. That's why... he was *nice*. Do you know how hard it is to find a nice firebending boy? And he was never as good as Azula, never good enough for the Fire Lord... but he could show you the best ways to sneak into the kitchen, and he never laughed when my knives went all over the place. And they did, when I was starting out. A lot." She shivered. "I have a little brother. Tom-Tom. He's two, he's a brat... but my parents love him. Earth Kingdom rebels and the Avatar kidnapped him. And Azula... Azula made me choose..."

"She's horrible," Min breathed.

"She's the Fire Princess," Mai said flatly. "Fire Lord Ozai's chosen heir. No loyal citizen of the Fire Nation can disobey her commands." She took a breath. "Except Zuko. And General Iroh." Another breath. "So I had no choice."

"We weren't even aware it was possible for one of the Fire Nation to survive broken loyalties," Quan said thoughtfully. "That's... interesting."

Mai looked at him, and the young man Quan was carefully not looking at, and felt something twist behind her carefully-built wall of indifference. "How did it happen? I know how I got into this mess. How did you?"

Min swallowed, silent.

"I'm dying, Min." Mai made herself face it, head on. She'd avoided the truth of Azula for years. The least she could do was accept this one. "If I make it to dawn, if Agni shines on me and I'm not dead yet... I might live. But the fire inside me is bleeding, and I'm so cold..." She swallowed the tears. "And I can't even have Ty Lee in here, because she'd guess. She'd try to do something... and Azula would take her out, too. I'm cold." *I'm alone. I don't want to die alone.*

At least her parents had the son they'd always wanted. Her clan would survive.

"We'll have a fire built up," Quan said neutrally. "It wouldn't do for a guest of the Earth King to be... uncomfortable. Especially since her leader is about to be called on an unexpected official visit."

Long Feng is making his move. Mai nodded, accepting the gift of information. Or make that the offered trade, from the slight edge to his glance. "Zuko's telling the truth," she said in return. "Whatever your Grand Secretariat has planned, Azula's going to be three steps ahead of him. She's brilliant. And she's of Sozin's line. Ba Sing Se *will* fall. She'll make it happen."

"We are loyal to Long Feng," Quan stated. "I must bring her to him."

"Then let General Iroh's plan happen," Mai answered. "I don't know if it will save the city. But it'll save something." Her lips quirked in a bitter smile. "Zuko's still alive. Up against Azula... that's not easy."

"Isn't that why you're telling us this?" Min said bitterly. "Trying to save your boyfriend?"

"Ex-boyfriend," Mai said flatly. "When I was nine, Azula put an apple on my head and hit it with a fire blast. Zuko knocked me into a pond to try and put it out." She shrugged, shifting layers of blankets. "Who would you rather trust with the city?"

"An interesting argument," Quan noted. "Trainee Min will remain with you, if there's anything else that can help." He paused in the opening of stone. "And as I understand it, Professor Tingzhe Wen comes from an impeccable line of Ba Sing Se earthbenders. His wife Meixiang... was a refugee, about eighteen years ago. With valid documents, of course." He didn't even glance toward Min. "Though it seems the family has been trying to conceal the fact that their youngest, Jinhai, appears to have been gifted as a... waterbender. Perfectly understandable, of course. It's the sort of thing that would lead to pressure on the university to cost the professor his tenure; even his position. No noble would want their child instructed by someone who had connections to the Foggy Swamp." Smiling slightly, Quan stepped into the shadows, raising stone behind him.

For the first time in a long time, Mai found her jaw tempted to drop. "A *waterbender*?"

"Hot water," Min mumbled, embarrassed. "But I guess you know that trick."

"I've never even *heard* of that." Mai blinked, surprised. Amazing. She hadn't felt that in... years.

I want to feel that again. I want to live.

Mai had to smile slightly. "So you're in this because of your little brother, too. That's kind of funny." Another tremor shook her; she clenched her teeth against it-

Min got an awkward arm around her, holding the cup when her own hands shook too badly. "Is there - would a healer help? I might be able to sneak Amaya in..."

Amaya. That's a Water Tribe name. "A waterbender?" Mai shook her head. "I need fire. Not something to put it out." She glanced down to his fingers, still wrapped around hers. "Your hands are warm."

Min almost pulled away. Braced himself, and looked at her again. "My mother's the *enemy*," he managed. "How am I... how can I live with that? She's lied to me all my life, and now my little brother..." He shook his head. "What could I do?"

"Sometimes there aren't any good choices," Mai said quietly. Looked back at him, studying pain-filled green eyes. "Talk to me. Ty Lee's... always talking." *It let me forget what we were doing. Sometimes.* "I've been with the princess chasing the Avatar for the past few months. What have you been doing?"

"Trying not to strangle my little brother?" Min offered.

"Oh come on. That's a given." Mai smirked. Just a little. "Little brothers are *annoying*. It's their job." She lifted a black brow. "What do *you* do? You're in the Dai Li. You must be a good bender."

"Not as good as I want to be," Min admitted. "Trained agents... did you see how smooth that wall opened? Have you ever seen anything like that?"

"The Avatar's earthbender," Mai nodded. "She's the only one I've seen that good." She let herself have another slight smile. "Even better than the Terra Team."

"That's what I want," Min said, intense. "To be that good. To know what I'm doing is the right thing for... for our people." He swallowed dryly. "And then, last month, everything... fell apart."

Mai listened, letting the words beat back the cold. And hoped.

In his nightmares, Zuko walked on water.

Sometimes it was ice, solid as a glacier or crackling underfoot. Sometimes it just *was*, water rejecting his very footfall, refusing to even have the mercy of drowning him for Sozin's deeds.

This night, like so many nights, the ocean was awash in bodies.

Armor was cold and slick under his bare feet; not yielding itself, but dipping into water in a way that told of the flood-bloated flesh within. He could smell the corruption, taste the horror in the air; rank and fetid, oddly out of place in air so crisp and still.

The ocean rose and fell in a slow wave, a feaster sated at last.

There's nothing I can do.

Zuko walked. Past the staring blind eyes of the dead. Past rolling, unnaturally living eyes in moon-pale dead faces. Past those with no eyes or ears or face, the scavengers of sea and air already feeding.

Nothing I can do... too late, couldn't stop it... couldn't help... failure, always the failure...

And his next step was on the sodden robe of a woman, drowned with her child in her arms.

Mud... debris... not the North Pole...

The clear blue sky of autumn mocked him, sun beating down like a hammer, boiling dead and living alike in the steam of a Fire Nation afternoon. The stench caught him by the throat, strangling him, seeping into clothes and hair and skin until he thought he'd never be rid of it. Only the very tiniest of lizard-birds, the mosquito hawks, kept insect hordes at bay. Blue and red-brown and beetle-green feathers flashed like fireworks in the wind.

In the midst of the rubble near the bodies, something moved.

No... no, I don't want to see this again, please...

A tattered lion-dog, faithful to the last. Matted with mud, starving; trying to lift its head, and he crooned to it that it was okay, he'd been a good boy...

NO!

Zuko woke in the green dimness, breath ragged. Covered his face with his hands, and let the tears soak his sleeves.

Nara. Spirits. Nara again.

The Fire Lord was no idiot. Why leave a good general sitting around rusting, even if Iroh had been training a crown prince? Logistics, planning, coordination, adaptability - they weren't just good on the battlefield. The Fire Nation needed them at home, desperately, from late summer throughout autumn. The season of air. Of storms. Of the spirit-winds, the hurricanes.

Nara had been almost five years ago, now. One of the worst storms to hit the Fire Nation in decades. Thousands of homes destroyed. Ships demolished, or lifted by wind and wave miles inland. Hundreds dead, despite their lords' best precautions. And they'd tried so *hard*...

We're on an up cycle, Uncle says. For the next twenty years, it's just going to get worse.

He believed Iroh. Completely. Nothing else could explain chasing the Avatar into a hurricane in the middle of the spirit-damned *winter*.

It was just weeks after the solstice! There aren't supposed to be storms like that, not when the sun is just starting to come back!

So he'd doubted his uncle, and his ship and crew had almost paid the ultimate price. Like so many of Nara had paid.

It was Nara that had made him realize he had to stop Azula. He'd been with Uncle and their contingent of guards, seeing the death and devastation... and the order brought out of chaos, as General Iroh and the Home Guard brought in food, clean water, and steel-edged hope. Seeing the difference in deaths between the larger port of Nara, where the land had actually been hit harder - and Jang Hui, up a nearby river, whose lord was weak and whose far fewer people had died by the scores.

You don't understand us, Zuko thought wearily, not looking toward where the waterbender slept. How could you? Life at the Poles is hard, but it doesn't change. You know when the ice will freeze. When the winter storms will howl. When you need to hunt. When you need to prepare.

The Fire Nation had to prepare every summer, for storms that might not hit at all. That might not hit for *years*. Or might hit four or more in a month, devastating land and fleets alike. There had to

be a plan. There had to be supplies laid in, and forts on higher ground, and a record of who could move to safety on their own, and where to look for those who'd need help. And there had to be a strong, compassionate lord, and a loyal people. Because the most warning anyone *ever* had was two days in advance, and that only if a fleet with a sharp-eyed captain sent a messenger hawk in time.

Zuko loved the wind. A clear, brisk breeze on the ocean, carrying the scent of salt and green of distant lands... there was nothing like it. But the monsters of wind and storm and wave that roared off the Western Ocean in autumn - no. He knew them too well.

You command the wind, Avatar Aang. You command the storm itself, if you wish. Zuko shook his head. *Don't you know why we hated your people?*

Enough koala-woolgathering. Time to put one of his bad habits to use, and see if he could fall asleep meditating. Breathe in, and hold, and out...

Momo curled next to her heart, Katara waited in the darkness for strained breathing to even out. And shivered.

I thought it was Sokka, having a nightmare about - about Mom...

The same kind of strangled gasp, that in waking life would have been a scream. The same hitch of breath as terror shot its victim from sleep to bolt awake, and the mind scrambled to catch up. The same stifled sounds, and sense of water moving, as her brother hiding tears.

Zuko wasn't like her brother. At all.

But he wasn't acting like Zuko either. Not like the enemy she knew. *Checking* somebody with his healing? Who wasn't Iroh, or bleeding to death? He'd even looked... almost *nice*, doing it.

Must be the hair. Makes him look harmless.

Yeah, right. Like anybody who could punch like that could ever be harmless. No challenge, no stepping out into the open so she could see him, no chance for her to threaten him back - Zuko might talk a lot about honor, but the worst Water Tribe warrior she'd *ever* met had more. Even Haun and his warriors, who Chief Arnook had sent on that sneaky, dishonest mission Sokka had told her about, dressing up as Fire Nation warriors - even they would have had the decency to challenge Zhao before they killed him.

They must have been very brave. None of them had come back.

Zuko? Rescue anybody? What, walk up to a stronghold Zhao was in, and say, "For my honor, turn over the Avatar"? I don't think so.

So Shirong was lying to her. That made sense; he was Dai Li. But given the professor was *worried* about Dai Li, but seemed to trust this one... Something about this whole situation seemed wrong.

Why won't anyone listen to me?

It could just be Ba Sing Se. But it didn't feel like the Joo Dees' misdirection, or the Earth King's bewildered ignorance, or even the generals' hunger to strike back at the Fire Nation. This - it was like these people didn't think the Fire Nation was the enemy!

No, Katara thought. *The professor said Fire Nation soldiers were monsters. But not the whole nation.* Which didn't make *sense*. The warriors *were* the nation. Every Water Tribe man fought.

But... a lot of Earth Kingdom men didn't seem like warriors at all. They didn't carry swords, or spears. They didn't dress like they were ready to fight; not in fancy clothes like *that*. And they gave Sokka's weapons weird looks, walking around town. Clothes, too. But especially the weapons.

It just didn't make *sense*. How could Iroh say Zuko wasn't evil? That was like saying Sokka *could* be evil, when everyone knew he was Hakoda's son! Good people had good children, and evil people... well, there weren't any left in her tribe, but she knew what you did with *those*. Wait until you got them alone, then push them off the ice when no one was looking.

...Okay, so ice was probably a little harder to come by in the Fire Nation, given Aang had once said there were only a few places it ever snowed. There had to be *something* just as good.

Though if there wasn't, that would explain a lot.

Ooo, she just wanted to sneak over there, lock the jerk up in ice, and *demand* some straight answers out of him!

...Except that even locked in ice, Zuko was a pretty scary firebender. Master Pakku had told her that freezing a firebender in a wave of ice like that would, as he'd smirked, "stop them cold."

She'd frozen Zuko. Smirked at him, heart still racing, glad that it was finally over and Aang was safe...

Then the sun had risen, and the next thing she remembered was waking up to an aching head and Aang *gone*.

Some finishing move. She might as well have been throwing snowballs.

Which was why she was not going to freeze him now, no matter how much she wanted to. All she had was her waterskin, and it obviously took more than that to take Zuko down.

Besides. Attack him the way he *deserved* to be attacked, and he'd probably pull some "poor little me" lie on the Wens. As if he were *innocent*.

Aang's the one who's innocent!

She'd never had a problem getting people to believe that before. Well, except for Chin Village. But they'd had this crazy idea that Chin the Conqueror was a *good* guy.

It's like I'm stuck behind ice. I pound and pound, and they see me, but they're not listening...

Katara's breath caught. Meixiang... she'd said something about Azula using inner fire - whatever that was - on people who were *vulnerable*. And something about Zuko maybe doing that to Shirong...

Maybe it's not ice I'm pounding on.

Moving quietly, she uncapped her waterskin, wrapping a soft glow around her fingers-

Steel gleamed in faint green light. "Amaya doesn't heal people without permission."

Meixiang's voice. Soft and quiet, but edged with the same steel as the dagger she was stropping on a bit of cloth, kneeling between Katara and her children. "I thought you might be tempted to try

something," the professor's wife went on. "For both our sakes, don't."

"I just want to help!" Katara kept it to an urgent whisper, uneasily aware of the firebender in the corner, and Iroh napping with the other adults near the cave entrance. "I don't know what Zuko did to you, but-"

"All he has done is be a young man, working as a healer in Ba Sing Se," Meixiang said simply. "Just one more refugee, among thousands. He's impulsive, yes. Rude, sometimes. And he certainly has a temper. But I've seen worse. Even my Min has been more thoughtless, sometimes."

Katara snorted. "Somehow, I don't think your son ever *burned down a village*."

"No," Meixiang said calmly. "But I would, to protect the people I love." Another slow strop of cloth on steel; Meixiang didn't even watch her fingers move, green gaze fixed on Katara. "Please stay away from my children."

Mouth dry, Katara bent her water back into its skin, and dove back into her futon. The last time she'd seen someone look like *that*...

Mom told me to leave the tent. When she knew what that firebender was going to do.

Meixiang was putting herself between Katara and her children. Against the Avatar's waterbending master. With only a *knife*.

But I'm not like him! I'm not!

Yet that *look*, frightened and determined and knowing there might be no way out...

I'm not like him! I'm not like Zuko!

Angry enough to shatter icebergs, Katara cried herself to sleep.

Shirong wasn't sure how long he'd been drowsing before footsteps and murmured voices trembled the earth. He opened his eyes to see the general wrap Amaya in a fierce hug, while the Wens traded amused glances and held hands. "You're all right," he said, barely loud enough to be heard. All too aware of the children tumbled together in their futons, and one young man knotted on himself in the most defensible corner he could find. "We were worried."

"Agent Bon warned me it was time to go." Amaya beckoned him over, so they could move around a corner in stone and Tingzhe could raise a wall to keep exhausted youngsters from waking. "He couldn't say it directly, but I think Min is safe, for now. The Wen family is under suspicion... for concealing a *waterbender*. Which is reason for an interrogation, but not an arrest." Amaya gave Tingzhe a sober look. "From what Bon didn't say, Quan would prefer it if you never showed up for that interrogation."

"So it's exile, then," Tingzhe said heavily. "Spirits..." He caught Meixiang's worried look, and gave her a tired smile. "He's alive. Exile means nothing beside that."

"Exile is when you leave everyone you care about behind, love," Meixiang said firmly. "I did that once. This? You're here. My children are here, or as safe as they can be. This isn't exile." She smiled back, proud and sad. "You did what you had to for our city, and for the Avatar. Now, we have to look after our clan."

Amaya stepped aside with Iroh, to give the pair a breath more privacy. Looked Shirong up and down with a critical eye. "Are you well?"

"Better," Shirong said plainly, thinking of fiery colors, and the odd shock of holding a lit lamp. "But I think I need you to be a bit more specific about exactly what your apprentice... overdid." He cast a glance at Meixiang. "And why that makes certain people think the Dai Li are vulnerable to the Fire Princess."

"Ah." It was Iroh who nodded, surprising Shirong. "That, I fear, is something we must all discuss. It may change our plans for escape. And if it does not, it changes the *urgency* of those plans. Even, perhaps, beyond what is necessary to deal with Azula."

Shirong eyed the retired general. "We're fugitives. Azula, who you say is a master firebender and tactician, is in the palace, ready to conspire with Long Feng." Which was reassuring only in that Long Feng knew how important Kuei's life was to Ba Sing Se. His king *should* be safe. For now. "And any day, the Avatar might fly right back into a trap. Oma and Shu, how can things get any *worse*?"

Iroh regarded him for a moment, eyes half-closed as he seemed to *listen*. And then sighed, nodding. "Three reasons. Two of which are tightly intertwined. But the first - yes. The Dai Li are vulnerable to Azula. And they will have no warning, before their own hearts betray them."

Shirong shook his head, unwilling to believe that. And more than unwilling to look at why he felt Iroh was right. "That makes no sense. We're loyal to the city."

"To death, and beyond," Iroh said gravely. "For Ba Sing Se, you fight the spirit world itself. And that requires courage beyond that of even a skilled bender. It requires a spirit that fights to live, to prevail, to *conquer* any enemy set against it." He paused, deliberately. "A soul touched by fire."

Shirong stiffened. "We're Earth Kingdom."

"You are," Iroh agreed. "Though perhaps your family, generations ago... well. Every spirit has a touch of all four elements. Even the strongest firebender has water within him, binding him to family and home. The Dai Li are earthbenders, but your training and battles strengthen the fire within you as well. And that fire, that *loyalty*, is vulnerable to the pull of greater fires. Like Azula's."

"Because she's of the blood of Sozin?" Shirong folded his arms, unconvinced. "I don't see any Dai Li following *you* around, General."

"An old tea-maker? That would be most inconvenient." Iroh smiled. And straightened, green eyes no longer full of bemused affection, but sharp as a diamond blade-

Shirong staggered, breath driven from his lungs in a gasp of fear and fury.

This. This is what faced the haima-jiao. The general who held us under siege for six hundred days.

This is the Dragon of the West.

In his sense of spirits, Iroh *burned*.

Power crushed like a fiery vise, threatening to burn him to ashes. His only hope to survive was to join his small flame to that inferno; to give himself to it and let the firestorm carry him...

No.

A raft in a hurricane; a grasping hand, gripping before he could slip into the abyss. *Something* let his spirit brace against it, lending its strength to his own. Not as fierce and strong as the inferno pressing on him, no. But it was enough. "No." Shirong dared to meet Iroh's gaze, voice shaking. "You can't have me."

"And I will not," General Iroh said gently. The sense of fire retreated, until he only seemed a harmless bender again. "Do not fear, Agent Shirong. I would never tamper with the loyalty of one who has already chosen his lord." He sighed, grim. "But Azula is not so honorable."

"Most Dai Li have never been so deeply wounded by the spirits," Amaya stated, as Shirong tried to catch his breath. "I doubt she could influence them so easily."

"Not directly, no," Iroh nodded. "But neither will they sense her fire so clearly, or be so quick to fight against it. They will simply believe they are impressed by her skills, her tactics, and her ruthlessness. They will *want* to follow her. Long Feng will not lose them in one heartbeat of chosen loyalties. They will simply... slip through his fingers."

"Then stop her." Tingzhe looked almost as rattled as Shirong felt, but he stood firm as the university itself. "If she can turn the Dai Li, surely you can as well."

"I cannot," Iroh shook his head. "Azula will act as an ally of Long Feng. Which she *is*, so long as he serves her purposes. I am his enemy. Spirit to spirit, that cannot be feigned." He sighed. "Even if I could, I have a more important responsibility. Prince Zuko *must* escape Ba Sing Se."

"We all need to do that," Shirong pointed out dryly. *Leave Ba Sing Se. Spirits, I never thought I would.*

"But we are not all *yāorén*." Iroh indulged in a wry smile at their looks of confusion. "You are not the only one interested in old history, Professor. I have contacts with records which are... very old, indeed." He regarded Amaya. "When Zuko drowned, he was told the spirits were in disagreement over what should happen to the Fire Nation, and to the world. That the Avatar was human as well as spirit, and none knew what he might do. But," he raised a determined finger, "the Moon also said my nephew's efforts to restore balance deserved *her* answer."

"The Moon gave him waterbending?" Shirong said, very carefully. *A Fire Nation prince?*

"An event I found as surprising as you," Iroh said dryly. "Imagine my further surprise when I learned - only hours ago - this may *not* be the first time a firebender has been so gifted."

You could have felt a pin drop.

"Long ago, so long it has been lost to all our nations, the Avatar may not have been alone in keeping balance in the world," Iroh went on. "The records are but fragments, yet... it seems there were others to aid him, and give him council. Only the Avatar could bend all four elements, true - but what remains about the *yāorén* suggests they *could* bend two. And so they too would know the struggle of learning to master more than one element; the difficulty, and the heartbreak, of trying to belong to more than one nation." He let out a slow breath. "But while the Avatar is born, it seems a *yāorén* could only be *made*. And that, only at great risk. Those I asked did not have a record of what that risk was... but Zuko *died*. Even if only for moments. I do not doubt, had he not succeeded in the tasks the spirits set him - my nephew would not have returned to me."

"And if you can bend one element, why risk your life for two?" Meixiang nodded. "There could never have been many of them."

"And the fewer people who know a technique, the more easily it can be lost," Tingzhe said gravely.

"At the risk of sounding horribly disrespectful to a certain great spirit," Shirong said carefully, "your nephew is the *last* person I'd pick to... *counsel* the Avatar."

"Shirong," Amaya said, half-scolding, "you know Lee better than that."

"Please, allow me," Iroh said mildly. "For you well know, on the surface, it would seem he is right."

On the surface? Shirong thought in disbelief. Reconsidered, taking into account precisely who was speaking; not just Lee's fond uncle, but the general who had harried the Earth Kingdom army from one end of the continent to the other. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"I am not well pleased myself," Iroh said gravely. "But having pursued the Avatar at my nephew's side, I have seen things the airbender lacks, whose absence may yet lead to a very short life. *Would* have led so, save for the Water Tribe children and young Toph." He let a breath sigh out, counting off items on his fingers. "Aang is reckless. While I fully understand the use of excessive force against an enemy, Aang's bending has often caused as much damage to his surroundings - and far more to innocent bystanders - as my nephew. And that before the Avatar state was unleashed."

"When Zuko was *firebending*?" Meixiang's brows climbed.

"Even so," Iroh said dryly. Lifted a second finger. "Aang is naive. He has little grasp of the differences in customs between nations, and appears to believe that any custom he disagrees with may be flaunted without thought or fear of reprisal. Breaking a prisoner's parole he gave my nephew. Teaching Katara combative waterbending in secret at the North Pole, when women were not permitted to learn. And here, in Ba Sing Se, invading the very palace to see the Earth King." Iroh shook his head. "I do not say he did not have reason to do so. The Avatar had no reason to know my nephew was honorable. Katara needed to be taught. And Kuei needed, badly, to know the truth of his city. But every time he has acted, Aang has been amazed that there were *consequences*."

Amaya gave Iroh a considering look. "How do you know what the Avatar did at the North Pole?"

Iroh's grin was pure mischief. "That, I cannot tell you. Yet. There are ways; I hope to tell you of them in time."

"Ice cubes," Amaya muttered. "Sleeping robe. Don't think I won't."

"I never doubted it," Iroh said virtuously. And raised a third finger. "Aang is... irresponsible. From what Amaya has told me, he has already tried firebending - before he was ready to learn - and whatever the result, he has now decided he will *never* firebend." Iroh looked grim. "He is the Avatar. He *is* a firebender, whether or not he wishes to be. If he does not master his inner fire, he will not master *himself*." The general swept them all with a sober gaze. "We have all seen our world without an Avatar. Do we wish to see our world with an Avatar's power unleashed by one who will not *think*?"

"Iroh," Shirong said quietly. Daring to look that most dangerous man in the eye. "He's a twelve-year-old boy."

"So he is," Iroh nodded. "Do not think I do not feel compassion. No child should be forced to bear the fate of the world. And I have seen many children bereft by war. I do not doubt some of what

drives his recklessness is the need to forget. The need to do something, *anything*, rather than live in a world which has destroyed all he knew and loved." Iroh looked down, saddened. "I grieve that his people are no more. I *understand* why he wishes to run from his duty. But the spirits will not allow it. No matter how much harm that does Aang, or any of us."

Amaya stirred at his side. "You *do* believe the spirits have been using Zuko to chase Aang."

"Yes." Iroh looked away, as if into memory. "Were it not for my nephew's determination to track any lead, no matter how slim, no Fire Nation ship would have been close enough to spot the Avatar's awakening. Aang would still be with the Southern Water Tribe, a child among the other children. And that... would not suit the spirits' purposes."

"You have a nasty, suspicious mind," Shirong stated, smiling wryly. *And thank the spirits for that.* Lee - Zuko - would never have lasted this long without guile on his side.

"An unfortunate side effect of command," Iroh chuckled. "Or at least, of surviving it." He sobered. "But I think you are right. It is not wise for the spirits to have chosen my nephew for such a task. Not because he would not be capable of it, *if* he survived disobeying the Fire Lord. But because Aang's other allies, save Toph, hate us. As Katara hates us. And how can anyone expect a young boy to listen to the hard reality of my nephew's good sense, when those who have taken him in as family speak against such advice simply because it is Zuko's?"

Ouch, Shirong winced. "Not to mention that *small* detail of your nephew having chased him across the world. Fire, clanking armor, life or death insults...."

"My nephew took very good care of his armor," Iroh said practically. "It never clanked."

Meixiang smiled. Tingzhe raised a brow at her. "Just picturing our Lee in armor, dear. He doesn't have quite enough hair yet for a respectable topknot... oh." She looked at Iroh, eyes worried. "I hadn't really... thought about that before."

"Hair grows back," Iroh smiled ruefully. "My nephew needed my support, more than I needed my pride."

Gentle words, but the steel behind them hardened Shirong's intuition into conviction. "You're not about to let the spirits have their way, are you?"

"If I had let certain spirits act as they willed, neither Zuko nor I would be here," Iroh observed.

Shirong looked at him askance. "You're getting Zuko out so the spirits' plan won't work. So he won't be here when the Avatar comes looking for Katara, and won't get shanghaied into being this... yāorén counselor."

"That is my intent, yes."

"But to go against the spirits-" Tingzhe began.

"My nephew is human!" Iroh's fists clenched; he made himself breathe. "My nephew has lost everything he hoped to gain. *Again*. Even if his loyalty were not at stake, even if he chose to help the Avatar freely - what help would he be to Aang, when the Avatar loathes the very thought of firebending? When Katara, whom Aang trusts, calls us monsters?" Iroh shook his head. "The Avatar is the bridge between our world and the spirits *because* spirits do not understand humans well. I do not intend to go *against* the spirits. I simply believe they have miscalculated. For if there is one thing I have learned raising my son and nephew, it is that you cannot *force* a boy to listen. *He* must decide he needs help, and seek you out." He sighed. "And so, yes. I will remove Zuko

from this city before the Avatar can return. My contacts claim he went to the Western Air Temple, to learn... certain things. That should take some time; three, perhaps four more days, at the least." He regarded Shirong. "We will get Zuko out. And we will get you out, as well."

"Me?" Shirong said, startled, as Amaya clapped a hand to her forehead with a muffled groan of disbelief. "What... how... what did Zuko *do*?"

"I missed it," Amaya admitted. "The obvious signs weren't there, so I thought it wasn't as serious.... The technique I mentioned? It usually has three components. Body, mind, and spirit. You didn't need the first two, but the haima-jiao was drowning your spirit. He must have *poured* flame in to fight it."

"So I believe," Iroh said gently. And lit a flame in one cupped hand.

He can't be serious, Shirong thought, stunned. *He can't mean....*

Iroh's smile was patient, and touched with rueful humor. He waited.

He could wait there all night. Shirong swallowed dryly, and held out a nerveless hand.

"Do not fear," Iroh said, still gentle. "Controlling fire is difficult. Holding it, if one does not move too hastily, is easy. Breathe, and remember you are part of each other."

Like holding a baby cat-owl. Warm, and fragile; a heartbeat he could feel through his fingertips, warming his very bones. It pulled on his energies, light as moving grains of sand, flickering with his breath.

I think I want to sit down now.

"Do you know what this means?" Tingzhe asked in amazement, as Iroh snuffed that unsettling flame.

"That I've become the enemy?" Shirong snapped, voice ragged. Mourning the absence of fire like he would an old friend. *Spirits*.

"It means we have hope," Tingzhe said, not rising to the bait. "It means my children, my family... we won't be alone."

"No, we won't," Meixiang agreed. "Our people will come. Anyone who's never quite fit into Ba Sing Se. And probably quite a few who thought they did, before...."

Iroh raised his eyebrows, curious.

Meixiang's smile was touched with bittersweet amusement. "You control your inner fire, Prince Iroh. So you go unnoticed. Prince Zuko... doesn't."

Stunned realization swept over Iroh's face, and he closed his eyes in utter disbelief. "Oh, Agni. I did not even *think* of it."

"Think of what?" Shirong glanced at Amaya, who seemed just as clueless.

"He was *thirteen* when we left." Iroh was - groaning, Shirong decided. "Barely old enough... and he struggled so hard with the basics, I did not think to work on such advanced techniques... and there was no *need*, those assigned to our ship were always in a clear chain of command, there were no civilians...."

"Meixiang?" Tingzhe asked, wary as Shirong felt.

She smiled ruefully. "The general's just realized he's dropped a lodestone in a sandpit laced with iron filings."

Laced with-? Shirong felt his jaw drop as the implications finally hit home. *Meixiang, these two - they're not isolated colonial survivors. Which means....* "How many Fire Nation refugees *are* there in Ba Sing Se?"

"Counting children born here? Over three thousand." Amaya looked just as stunned. "And I've managed to bring Zuko near most of them."

Thousands. A drop in the bucket, compared to the millions within the Outer Wall. Even so....
"This had better be a really good plan," Shirong said levelly.

"I hope that it is." Iroh straightened, shaking off shock. "For I will need to rely on all of you, and whoever you can trust, to begin carrying it out. It will only work if Aang is *not here* - and to ensure that, Zuko and I must see that Katara gets to safety. Azula *will* be searching for her, and none of you would survive Azula, should fate turn against us." He stepped aside, and reached into a satchel Amaya had brought to draw out a thick sheaf of notes. "Come, and tell me what you think we can do."

A/N: *Hono'o shoshinsha* - "beginner flame". Roughly, a young firebender.

Yāorén - sorcerer (Chinese). Interestingly, the Chinese word for the art of sorcery, *wu*, is also that for dance. Which certainly brings bending styles to mind. And certain types of sorcery did, specifically, involve invoking the four elements of air, earth, fire, and water, instead of the more usual Oriental suite of five elements (earth, fire, water, wood, and metal) seen in feng shui.

Eskimo culture doesn't do prisons. To this day, pushing someone off the ice is quietly considered legitimate "treatment" for someone with incorrigibly antisocial behavior.

And Theodosia asked for a review of the names and generations... bear in mind that I'm going mostly from the show's *original* timeline (you can look on), before the creators retconned a few things. After all, the Guru's supposedly over 150 and in good (if eccentric) shape; Sozin making it to 153 seems *quite* reasonable. (Theodosia, if this doesn't cover what you asked, please let me know!)

Fire Lord Sozin: Born 183 years before the series begins. Wife unknown; one son, Azulon. Year of the start of his reign, not known. Died at 153, in bed, rich, and supposedly happy and respected, about 30 years before the series start. Appears to have regretted in his final years what he did to Roku.

Fire Lord Azulon: Born 100 years before Avatar begins, the same year the airbenders were wiped out. Wife Fire Lady Ilah; two sons, Iroh and Ozai. Reigned from about 30 years before series start to about 6 years before the series starts. Died at 93... and not from natural causes.

General Iroh (former crown prince): Born about 64 years before the series starts (from various sources). Which means he would have been 17 when Sozin died; and yes, knew him for some time. Wife in canon unknown, but implied to be deceased sometime after the birth of her only child, Lu Ten. Lu Ten's date of birth is unknown, but his memorial picture implies he was an adult serving in the army in the Siege of Ba Sing Se, where he died.

Fire Lord Ozai: Born about 43 years before the series starts. Only son of Sozin's line who had *not* served as a general, prior to the series. Wife Lady Ursa; she never had the chance to become Fire Lady. It is canon their marriage was arranged, and at first happy. Two children, Zuko (former crown prince) and Princess Azula.

Avatar Roku: Date of birth varies according to source, but shared a birthday with Sozin. Date of death known to be 112 years before the start of the series. Wife Ta Min. At least one son known to have been born. In this AU... well, they were married for *decades* before that volcano blew up. So I've written that they had some daughters as well: Momiji and Ilah. (And I have a plan for where that son went, too.)

We know from Piandao's case that non-firebender children are often given up by firebender parents. I can see this happening not just from unhappiness (as in his case) but pure safety reasons (the kid can't ever protect himself if you slip). Plus in pre-modern Japan, there was a custom of adopting children out into another family if their skills and inclinations matched a certain trade better than their birth family's. This was considered a good thing for the kids *and* the families; people got successors better fitted to their profession (a blacksmith needs muscle and skill, a brush-maker needs a more delicate touch), you didn't have as much of a "lead time" while a new youngster was taking up the post when his parents died (which could be fatal to a family business), and the families often kept in touch. So, Momiji got adopted out. She probably would have gone to a family with high status. Mai is a governor's daughter, implying the family's been powerful for some time; in this AU she is Momiji's great-granddaughter.

Ilah, however, was a firebender - and would have known her father still thought of Sozin as his dearest friend, despite years of being estranged. It seems to be canon that very few people, if any, knew how Roku died. I can see her falling for the baby Azulon, and given upper-rank firebenders have arranged marriages, that probably wouldn't have struck her as a bad idea when Sozin suggested it.

Kuzon of Byakko: I don't think we knew his age in canon, so I set it at 15. This means he was born 115 years before Avatar, and died 17 years before Aang woke up. Wife unknown. Daughter, Lady Kotone, who married the wandering swordsman and firebender Shidan. They in turn had one known daughter, Lady Ursa, age unknown. She looks to be in her thirties in Zuko's flashback, but we know benders tend to live a long time, so I have said she's at least Ozai's age.

And no, there are no death dates for Shidan and Kotone. Yes, go ahead, plot away...

Sorry if this sounds a bit tetchy, but... here's a final note for those who think characters focus too much on the Siege of the North. Take into account that Zuko and Iroh were on a *raft*, which means pretty much going with the current. Which means they saw everything *else* that drifted with that current. Which in turn means, in the aftermath of the Ocean Spirit, one hell of a lot of corpses. The words *major trauma* come to mind. Is Zuko obsessed with that incident? *Oh* yeah. Zuko *believes* in the Avatar... the way survivors of Andrew, Ivan, or Katrina believe in hurricanes. *That's* the level of devastation Aang caused.

I would say anyone who heard about - much less *saw* - the destruction of an entire Fire Navy fleet, who then saw Aang walking around town, ought to be forgiven for being *a bit twitchy*.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Let me get this straight." Toph gave herself a little shake to get rid of the dust from her... *mishap*, with moving earth and two smarty-pants boys sneaking up on her with a flying bison. Totally not fair. "Aang had a spooky spirit vision that Katara's in trouble, so we're going to run right into Ba Sing Se after her?" She cracked her knuckles. "Aang, you get Appa down *right now*."

"Hey!" Sokka protested. "Zuko's got my-"

"I heard it the first time, Snoozles!" *I just don't believe it*, Toph thought. *There's got to be a good reason*. "I need to talk to you guys, and I'm not doing it where I can't see you."

"But Katara's in trouble!" Aang protested.

"Hate to burst your bubble, Twinkletoes, but you got that vision when, exactly? If she's in trouble, she's been there a while. A few more minutes? Probably not going to make much difference." Toph pointed toward Sokka. More or less. "But it could make a heck of a lot of difference to *us*. You don't just jump into the ring in a rumble. You take a minute, you plan, and *then* you bust some heads."

"She's got a point," Sokka admitted reluctantly. "Appa could probably use a break, anyway. We've been flying all night."

"But it's *Katara*!" Aang objected.

"And I know my sister," Sokka said practically. "She'd hate it if we got hurt just because we didn't take a minute to put together a good plan. And this is Zuko. He may not have been up to beating all of us, even before Toph joined up. But you know he's not going to make this easy. And if he's working with Azula..."

Sokka let the words trail off, probably shaking his head. If she could only *see*. "This is why I need you guys to land!" Toph said, exasperated. "Where'd you get this crazy idea Zuko's working with Azula?"

"Well-" Aang started.

"On the *ground*, Twinkletoes!"

Grumbling under his breath, Aang set them down.

Land, Toph thought gratefully, wiggling bare toes in grassy herbs. Stepping carefully, to avoid a patch of thorny bramble; she might not be able to see the thorns, but they grabbed into earth with a pattern of fine roots she'd been able to recognize for years. "Okay. How'd you get Azula out of seeing Zuko hit Katara?"

"Because after he hit her, he touched her head - and she just fell over!" Aang said impatiently. "Just like Ty Lee!"

Toph felt Sokka's heart jump. "He hit her in the head?" Sokka asked. "You didn't say that before."

"Head, chest, what does it matter?" Aang grumbled.

"Then I guess Zuko knows something Ty Lee doesn't," Sokka frowned. "When she hit me in the head, all she got was bent fingers."

"Or he doesn't know *anything* about what Ty Lee does," Toph put in. *Careful, Toph*, she cautioned herself. *You tell them the straight truth, and they'll listen about as much as they did to Zuko's note. So... bend it a little.* "Look, I didn't want to mention this because I didn't want to get you guys upset... my parents? They're merchants. Really, really powerful merchants. Which means they deal with trade all over the world." She paused. "Even the Fire Nation."

"Whaaat?" Sokka yelped. Hand fishing for Boomerang with the speed of pure reflex.

"Sokka, calm down!" Aang held out empty hands, warding off the anger. "That's the way things used to be. The nations are separate, but people visited each other. I used to visit Bumi all the time. Even the monks brought fruit we picked at the temple to the Earth Kingdom to trade for rice noodles, and things that didn't grow that good on a mountain."

"Yeah, but- now?"

"I'm not saying it's a good thing," Toph said bluntly. "I'm just saying, they do. So I know some stuff about the Fire Nation." *Some of which I just got from Zuko, but... keep going.* "Ty Lee's a chi-blocker. That means she's not supposed to be outside the Fire Nation while there's a war on."

Sokka snorted. "Yeah, well, looks like Azula didn't get that messenger hawk-

"Zuko's been exiled *three years*."

Silence. Toph felt the two boys look at each other. "You already told us that," Aang said, puzzled.

"But we didn't think about it," Sokka admitted, unhappy. "You're saying Zuko can't know what Ty Lee does. Or they'd never have kicked him out."

"They probably would have stuck him in prison, or marooned him on some island even the sea vultures wouldn't land on," Toph nodded. "He sure wouldn't be running around loose."

"Ty Lee could have taught him," Aang pointed out. "I can learn other bending styles, he could- Sokka?"

The Water Tribe boy was shaking his head. "Told you. Ty Lee hits you in the head, all she does is hurt her hand." He eyed Toph. "But you didn't think Zuko was working with Azula even before that. Why? She's his sister."

"She wants to be the heir," Toph said bluntly.

"Yeah. We get that-

"No, you don't," Toph bit out. "This isn't *want to* like, I want the last berry-cake. This is, cut off my own *hand* to get this."

"Eww." Sokka shuddered.

"I don't get it," Aang said after a moment, patting Appa's side for comfort. "Why does it matter so much? The monks said your body was the house of your spirit, and you should always honor that. Why would you hurt yourself just for a title?"

"Were the temple elders just a title?" Toph shot back. "They were going to take you away from Gyatso; that's why Katara said you ran away. And I don't blame you one bit. Anyone who tried to take me away from you guys, I'd *squash* him." She slapped her palm with a fist. "But they thought they could do it, because they were the elders. It's not the title Crazy Blue Fire wants, Aang. It's the *power*. Some people... they're just like that. They're scary to be in the ring with. They don't just fight a good fight and learn from it. They do *anything* to win. Even cozying up to you for months, so they can jump you when you finally turn your back." Toph puffed a loose strand of hair out of her face. "The Fire Lord's heir has a lot of power. Azula wants it. She's *not* going to help Zuko. Ever."

"So Zuko just wants to catch me for the power." Aang's shoulders slumped.

"No, he doesn't," Toph shook her head. *Uh-oh*. "I mean, I don't think so. The scary people, the ones who'll put a boulder in your back? They don't care about people. Zuko cares about Uncle. A *lot*."

"You're not making sense," Aang groaned. "If Zuko doesn't want to be the heir, why doesn't he just quit chasing us?"

"First off? He's got orders," Toph said practically. "Nobody in the Fire Nation disobeys the Fire Lord. And reason number two? If he quits, Azula *is* the heir. You think she scares us? You have no *clue* how much she scares Zuko." She shrugged. "Sokka, I know this is gonna be creepy. But just for a minute? Try to pretend you're Zuko."

"That is creepy," Sokka shuddered again. "Grr, argh, honor?"

"Just shut up and listen," Toph scowled. "Think of it like - like the Fire Nation was your village. You'd be chief if your father died, right?"

"Well... yeah, maybe someday. Not *soon*."

"So, think of your village," Toph forged on. "Only instead of Katara for your sister, you've got Azula. And if you don't pull off something *impossible*, Azula's going to be ruling your village. How do you feel about it? Not-" She waved her hands before he could talk. "Not what you'd do. How do you *feel*?"

There was a long, uneasy silence. "Scared," Sokka whispered at last. "I'd be... really scared."

"Zuko's scared," Toph said quietly. "He's scared all the time. You guys think he's an angry jerk? He *is*. But he's angry because he's *scared*. For his people. *His* people, Sokka. Just like you're scared for the Water Tribe. And you know what? I don't blame him." She pointed toward Aang. "I'm on your side, Twinkletoes. I want the war over, and I want the balance back. But I don't *care* that you're the Avatar. You're my *friend*. I'm going to be there for you all the way. But you *know* Zuko. If he hit Katara when you weren't even there to catch - does that sound like one of his plans? Or does it sound like maybe we need to find something out before we crash the palace?" She crossed her arms. "'Cause if you want to *listen* before you move, I think I know where we can go to start asking."

"Wait a minute," Sokka said thoughtfully. "How do you know that? We just figured out it probably wasn't Ty Lee-"

"My parents saw a lot of healers." Toph waved a hand in front of blind eyes. "They know how to put people out, too."

"...You think Zuko's been training with a healer?" Aang said at last.

He wants to believe it, Toph realized, surprised. *He wants to believe Zuko would do something that's not evil*. "I think whatever he's up to, Zuko's not stupid. What if Azula caught them again, when Katara wasn't there? He almost *lost* Uncle. He's not going to do that again." She angled a blind glance Sokka's way. "And in Ba Sing Se? Anybody who heals is going to have to have a license. On record, where people can *look it up*."

"People, huh?" Sokka smirked. "I guess that leaves it up to us."

Toph grinned. "Not exactly."

Shift can't be over soon enough, Huojin thought. He wet his brush in ink to mark a few last, neat formal characters, finishing a report that explained exactly why someone had thought balancing on top of a lightpost was a good idea, and the resulting injuries and arrests: one set of busted ribs, someone else's busted arm, and a warehouse crew hopefully now sobering up in the general disorderly cell. *I need to get home*.

He wasn't quite sure what he'd *do* at home, given what he'd heard. But with the feeling out on the streets... he wanted to hold his family. And not let go for a while.

We need to figure out what we're going to do.

He and Luli had discussed it. Hashed what they knew of the general's plan over and over again. And decided... well, that they couldn't decide yet.

Huojin knew what he *wanted* to do. Whether or not it was the right thing for his family... he didn't know. He just *didn't*.

Loyalty isn't easy, Meixiang had told him. *It can break your heart*.

She'd sat him down for a good talking-to, not long after that hair-raising potluck. Filled him in on a few things he would have grown up knowing, if he'd grown up... somewhere else.

It was a heck of an eye-opener.

"Lee is a great name, and a firebender," Meixiang had said, after a few minutes circling around the point. "And he's sixteen. That's about the right age, in human terms, for a young dragon to strike out for his own territory. Or so my grandfather said."

"A young *what*?" Huojin had exclaimed in disbelief. Bad enough he had spirits on his beat. Dragons?

"All children of fire are children of dragons," Meixiang answered simply. "Where did you think gold eyes came from? No other nation has them. Ever."

"You're serious," he said, after a long moment of shock. "You really think that some of your ancestors were..." He flapped his hands.

"Large, predatory, wise creatures, with fire breath and far too many teeth?" For once, Meixiang looked almost as impish as Luli. "Tell me it doesn't explain Lee."

"*Nothing* explains Lee," Huojin said frankly. "So he's got a temper that should've gone to a dillolion. What's that got to do with me?"

"Dragons live in clans, just as we do. And those of lesser power seek those that are greater. They help defend the clan's territory, so all of them can hold more than just a strong dragon alone. And in return, the leader helps protect them." She had given him a sober look. "That's part of us, just as much as the eyes and the temper. You're a dragon's kin, and though you're not alone, you're not in the safety of a clan. And here is Lee. A strong firebender, who's already bled for your children." She'd spread her hands. "Your loyalty is your choice. But I thought someone should warn you that you will *want* to follow Lee. Whether or not it's wise."

And if that didn't send chills down a sane man's spine, nothing would. Which was why he was talking everything over with Luli. She might look like pure bounce and happiness, but his wife had a patient ability to poke at things from every angle, trained by long years coaxing beauty out of solid rock. If *she* thought Mushi's plan was a good idea...

I want to go. I really, really do. It's wild and crazy and risky - and they're going to need some Guards, to keep people behaving long enough to start working together. "We're all in this together" has a nasty tendency to go south the first time somebody swipes a bigger piece of fruit-tart than the next guy.

It'd be a challenge. One heck of a challenge. And damned if that didn't hook him just as much as that odd pull to *follow Lee*.

And he'd told Luli that. All of it. Laid it out as blunt as he could; that something in him had about as much common sense as one of the cackling idiots rumor said surfed the mail chutes of Omashu, and she shouldn't trust it one *inch*.

Luli had looked at him a long moment; then smiled, and kissed him... and that was way too distracting to be thinking about in the station, even if he was almost off-duty-

Something *thumped* in the street outside. Big. Heavy enough to shake the building. *Mad earthbender?* Huojin wondered, as the whole station broke off whatever they were doing to grab for weapons and whistles filled with pepper sand. Just in case.

There was a massive, animal groan outside.

...*Oh no*. Huojin capped his ink, and glanced furtively over the rest of his fellow Guards, all just going off shift, or coming on. *Maybe if I sneak out onto the roof, nobody will-*

"Huojin!"

Busted. "Yes, Captain?" Huojin said politely, trying to look alert and attentive and not trying to sneak out early at *all*, honest.

Like a scowling mountain, Captain An Lu-shan walked toward Huojin's desk from the front of the room, a trio of too-familiar kids trailing in his wake. "You brought 'em in the first time. Handle this."

And maybe there was a hint of apology under salt-and-pepper brows; everybody in the station knew what a narrow shave Luli and his kids had had. But *somebody* had to do it.

Huojin looked at blue and yellow and orange, and stifled a deep sigh. "Yes, sir."

And then green pushed her way through, and held out a hand, grinning. "Hey."

"Good morning, Miss Toph." Huojin smiled and shook it, suddenly feeling a little better about this mess. "I see your friends caught up to you." He let go, and looked into eyes of worried, angry blue

and gray. "How would you like to take this up onto the roof? It's quieter up there." *With a lot less witnesses.*

"Good idea," Sokka said thoughtfully. "Appa gets kind of worried if we're gone too long."

If I'd been caught by the Dai Li? Huojin thought, leading them upstairs past curious eyes. *Worried wouldn't even begin to cover it.*

"You stalled us."

Given those were Sokka's first words out on the roof, Huojin revised his opinion of how things were going to go right back down. "Damn right I did," he said bluntly. Trying not to eye the ten-ton furry beast craning his head to look up at them with a whuffle that blew Huojin's queue of hair back. "You want to know why?"

"Actually... yeah," Sokka admitted, waving Aang silent when the airbender looked like he wanted to explode. "We're Team Avatar. We can handle whole Fire Navy fleets coming after us. And you're just a regular guy."

Team Avatar? Huojin thought incredulously. *I take it back. This is why Lee's so snarly.* "Maybe I'm just one guy, but I like to think I'm a good friend. Lee was risking his *life* to give Toph a hand. Least I could do was make sure a bunch of kids didn't smash his plan to little pieces."

"It worked, too," Toph grinned.

"*Kids?*" Aang and Sokka yelped as one.

"I'm a *warrior!*" Sokka protested, voice almost cracking.

"Maybe you are," Huojin said honestly, "but your little sister? And the Avatar?" He shook his head. "Aang, I've got a *daughter* your age. What kind of father would I be if I let a twelve-year-old boy run smack into the Dai Li?"

Aang was staring at him like he'd turned purple and started spouting bad poetry. "But... I'm the Avatar."

"Right. From what people tell me, you're the bridge between our world and the spirits," Huojin nodded. "So you're a really, really, *really* powerful bender. Got it. But you're *twelve*. I don't know who you've been dealing with... no, actually, I know about some of the people you've been dealing with, I've heard a lot about the Council of Five, not much of it good. But any sane, responsible parent? They wouldn't be asking you to save the world. They'd be figuring out ways to *hide* you, so you get a chance to grow up." He shrugged. "I hate the war. But we've been fighting it for almost a century. We can keep fighting another few years, if that means we can finally *stop* it."

"...But I *have* to defeat the Fire Lord before the end of this summer," Aang said in a small voice. "Roku said Sozin's Comet is coming."

He did not just say what I think he did. "What?" Huojin croaked.

"It's this huge thing up in the sky-" Sokka started.

"I know what it is," Huojin managed. *Though I haven't heard anything about it in decades.* *Oh, Agni...* "You're sure?"

"Sure as spirit messages from dead Avatars get," Sokka said practically. "You know what it is?"

We'd never heard of it."

"I had a weird childhood," Huojin said wryly. Dug into memory for things a child of six had barely understood. "Oh, this is... not good."

"Not good *how*?" Toph pounced.

"You know what a waterbender can do on a full moon?" Huojin said bluntly. "Imagine a firebender a *hundred times* stronger."

The kids blanched.

Yeah. I'd kind of like to faint, too. "I knew you were in trouble," Huojin said honestly, looking directly at Aang. "I had no idea it was this bad. Is there anybody you can trust to help?" He glanced at Sokka. "I'm not talking about the generals. They keep Ba Sing Se safe, sure. But they think about the *city*, not the world. Armies and weapons and tactics, not people. Are there any grownups you know who would listen, and help? *Help*, not tell you what to do. Because... well, I'm just a Guard, what do I know about fighting a war? But I work the ghost watch. Kamuiy, I know. So I've got a funny feeling that saving the world *isn't* just stopping the war." He shrugged, and looked back at Aang. "If you're the Avatar, if you're really the guy who's supposed to bring balance back to the world - who do you trust to help you do it?"

Aang swallowed. "...I don't know."

"My dad," Sokka said firmly. "He's a good guy. I wasn't there long enough to hear the whole story, but Bato said something about a Fire Nation ship that didn't try to take prisoners-"

Uh-oh, Huojin winced.

"-They just threw out life-rafts and kept going," Sokka finished. "So... if Toph's right, and we need to stop *everybody* fighting - I think my dad would listen."

"*If* I'm right?" Toph rolled her eyes.

"Hey, even the Earth Rumble champion can miss something- Wait a minute!" Sokka shot Huojin a suspicious glance. "You're stalling us again!"

"What? Since when?" Huojin said, startled. And more than a little aggravated. "You're not just here about the bison?"

"No! We're here about my sister!"

"What *about* Katara?" *Will not strangle teenager for mangled priorities*, Huojin thought wryly. *Oma and Shu know, I pulled some bone-headed stunts when I was fifteen.*

"She's in trouble!" Aang insisted. As if he had doubted the boy. "The Fire Nation has her!"

"In the middle of Ba Sing Se?" Huojin said, startled. Held up a hand before the protests could break out. "We'll tell the captain, he can get word to the Army, we'll get people moving. Where? How? What do you know?"

"...I saw it in a vision," Aang admitted.

For a moment, Huojin had to just stare. "Oh, the captain's going to *love* this one," he groaned.

"Look, Aang saw what he saw!" Sokka said angrily.

"I never said he didn't," Huojin shot back. "I'm just saying it *sounds* crazy. I wouldn't believe it, if I hadn't seen some really weird stuff over the years." He shook himself. "Okay. *Vision*. Any details? Names, places... anything that can mark it in one of the Rings? At the Wall? Ba Sing Se's a big place."

"It's Zuko," Sokka said practically. "She could be anywhere by now. Just look for the angry jerk with the big scar." He gestured toward his left eye.

...Nah. Coincidence. "Hate to break it to you, but between the refugees and the veterans? There's a lot of people with scars," Huojin pointed out. *Though most of them know they'd better stick to the Lower Ring. And Amaya said the Avatar's people were up in the Upper Ring.* "Any other ways to pick him out? Young, old, what? Who is this guy? I didn't think anybody from the Fire Nation could sneak into Ba Sing Se." *Not without Amaya's contacts knowing about it, anyway.*

"You don't know Prince Ponytail," Sokka snorted. "He got into the middle of the North Pole once."

...Oh, no way. Because it really couldn't be. Lots of Fire Nation soldiers had attacked, right? And he *knew* Lee. Scarred and a great name, sure. Prince? The kid wasn't nearly arrogant enough for that. "Sounds serious," Huojin nodded. "You've met this guy before? How many troops is he going to have with him?"

Both boys looked taken aback at the thought. As well they should; if one Fire Nation infiltrator could make it inside, odds were there were more-

"Probably just Uncle," Toph said candidly. "They're fugitives. Something about General Iroh wrecking the whole North Pole invasion, by trying to save the Moon Spirit."

For a moment, nothing in Huojin's brain seemed to work. Fugitives... Moon... invasion fleet...

Urk.

No help for it. Next time he got hold of Lee, he had to *strangle* the kid. Just a little.

As if you could, the more practical side of him snarked.

Huojin told it to shut up, and took a deep breath. "You think the *Dragon of the West* is in Ba Sing Se?"

Well. He did say he was retired.

"If Zuko's here? Iroh's around somewhere," Sokka said practically. "But he's got a trick we've never seen from a firebender, so... Toph says you keep records of healers?"

A healing firebender. Oh Agni, they know what they're looking for.

"Or we could just talk to Amaya," Aang put in. "She seemed to know... something about the Fire Nation-"

"Huojin knows Lee's Fire Nation, Twinkletoes," Toph interrupted.

Sokka whipped his head around. "You said nobody could sneak in!"

"He didn't sneak," Huojin shrugged. "He came in on a ferry a month or so back, just like all the other refugees. Amaya took him on, and he's been working with her since. Quiet kid. No trouble." *Except for wrecking teashops, freezing noble kids, and breaking into Dai Li headquarters...*

laughing hysterically is not going to help. "But they're both gone. You'll have to try someone else." He gave the kids a sober look, hating what he was about to say would do to boys as... inexperienced as these, in what people did to stay in power. "They're gone. And so are the Wens."

"What?" Aang gasped.

"Luli and my daughters got out in time," Huojin said, trying not to let the banked anger seep into his voice. It wasn't easy. These were kids, just *kids*... but damn it, hadn't they *seen* what happened in Ba Sing Se? "If they hadn't, I think I'd really hate you right now." He made himself shrug. "That's the way it is here. Cross Long Feng, and you'd better hope you can dig a hole and pull it in after you."

"But the Earth King had Long Feng arrested," Sokka protested.

"Yeah?" Huojin raised a brow. "By who?"

From the uneasy looks, he already knew. *Obviously, have to mince it up into little words*, Huojin snarled silently. "Long Feng's ruled the Dai Li for *twenty years*. The last message Amaya got out, before that notice of a spiritual pilgrimage went up on her door... he still does." He looked away from the airbender, trying not to yield to the temper that wanted to break something. "You know, I know they chose to help you. Tingzhe. Meixiang. Amaya. Even Lee - and Lee was a *wreck* over that mess. I know why they did it, and I know they knew what they were risking. But they're *gone*. They're all gone, and if the Dai Li haven't caught them, they're running for their lives." He dusted off his hands, deliberately. "So if you want to put a missing persons report out on Katara, we can do that. You want to report there are Fire Nation infiltrators in the city? We'll do that too. But if you want to talk to city healers to find a fugitive firebender, you can read our records down in the station, in plain sight, so *nobody* in the Dai Li thinks they *wanted* to talk to you."

Gray eyes narrowed at him. "You said you wanted to help!"

Exactly when did I say that, kid? "Like you helped the Wens?" Huojin said flatly. "Meixiang told Luli about that. When she woke my wife up and told her to get our girls *out*." He looked straight at Toph; she might be blind, but the girl could read people better than a lot of Guards he'd met. "Tingzhe knows a lot of old secrets about the city. And Lee's one tough kid." *But you know that already, don't you? You knew all along.* "I hope they're okay. But the Dai Li... no one's ever brought them down."

Aang's hands gripped his airstaff, as he looked down, torn. Sokka frowned, eyes lifted as if seeing the outline of something blaze to life on the horizon.

Hello. I think I heard somebody's brain crank into gear.

"Forget the healers," Sokka said abruptly. "We need to head for the palace."

"We can't just forget about Katara!" Aang exclaimed.

"We're not going to," the Water Tribe boy said bluntly. "Remember what Toph said; think like Zuko. He wants to capture you. He's not going to hurt her, not if she's the bait. He'll use her to get to you - and that means he's got to let us know where she is. When he springs his trap, then we trap *him*." Sokka nodded to himself. "And the best way to do that is make sure everybody knows where you are. If we're shaking up the palace dragging Dai Li out of the walls, we'll kill two sea vultures with one boomerang."

"Right!" Aang brightened. "And if they're still working for Long Feng, we can make him tell us

where they took everybody!" He dashed off the edge of the roof, and floated down; Sokka smacked himself in the forehead, and went for the stairs.

"They're wrong," Huojin said in an undertone, before Toph could follow. "Lee's not trying to catch anyone."

"But Katara knows what he looks like," Toph said, just as quiet. "And she *hates* him... and he knows it. If they ran into each other, she wouldn't stop until the whole city knew where he and Uncle were. And *then* what?" She shook her head. "I don't think he'd hurt her. Not really. But the spirits don't seem to want to clue Aang in that gee, Zuko *really doesn't want to die*."

Which was just what would happen, if someone believed that Lee was... well, what he was. What a *mess*. "A prince." Huojin shook his head. "I chewed him out... told him when he was whining..."

"He was happy." Toph gave him a wry grin. "He really was. He likes you." A lift of her hands, and stone rose to a platform she stepped onto from the roof. A push, and it sank back down, letting her step onto Appa's back.

A prince. Squinting his eyes against the gale as they took off, Huojin waited for his brain to stop whirling. *No wonder he didn't know how to talk to normal people-*

"As my brother's loyalty is beyond question, Fire Lord Ozai neglected to see that I appeared," Mushi's voice echoed in memory.

Okay, that did it. If he ever caught up with Mushi again? He needed to *glare* at the man.

He didn't lie. Exactly. Came right to the knife edge of it, but I don't think he ever lied-

More fragments of other conversations floated up; about Agni Kais, and honor... and just what the Fire Lord had done.

Lee's the Fire Lord's son.

Oh Agni. No wonder that kid is so messed up.

And if that hadn't been a lousy enough break from the spirits, now the Avatar's little bunch of *heroes* was about to set off a city-wide search for Prince Zuko. When *Lee* was already underground, literally, because *something was wrong*.

Not if I can help it.

Huojin frowned, considering that fiery impulse. Sure, well and good to think that. But would pitting himself against the Avatar - the so-called balance of the world - actually do any good?

Yeah. It might.

Granted he'd only met the airbender twice, but he knew a fair amount about people. Aang was the flightiest person he'd *ever* met, including one wild-haired older gentleman convinced he could train lizard-birds to deliver the mail. On top of that, Aang seemed to automatically assume people were *going* to help him. No matter what it cost them.

Which means he probably thinks this problem is solved. And he'll just flutter on to the next one. Huojin grinned darkly.

Report Katara missing? Sure, he could do that. Start a massive manhunt just because a flutter-

brained boy had a vision?

I don't think so.

He might not know this *Prince Ponytail* Sokka had sneered at. But he knew *Lee*. The awkward, patient, stubborn healer who'd done his best to stitch parts of the Lower Ring together. The same Lower Ring that hadn't seen one tattooed *inch* of the Avatar until *he* needed something.

I want to follow Lee. Not just because I want to. Because - damn it, when you're out on the street, and the chips are down, you need somebody you can trust at your back.

He might have to trust Aang with the world. The world was a big place; there had to be a limit to how much any one bender could mess with it. But trust a boy Lim's age with something as fragile as a human life?

I hope Sokka's dad can help you out, Aang. But he's not here, so I'm going to have to do what your father should have done. I have to say no.

Oddly lighthearted, Huojin headed down the stairs.

"Young lady, how did you get here?"

"A lot of very unhelpful people, General How." Glancing at the small troop of soldiers around the edges of the general's private strategy room, Katara fingered the invasion plan still up her sleeve. She kept her face serious, despite Momo's chirps on her shoulder; given how the Council of Five had reacted to just a *little* laugh with the strategy pieces, she'd better get this right. Stuck-up, gloomy, over-decorated... Chief Hakoda didn't need fancy weapons and armor to fight. And he actually *smiled*.

Dad. I miss you so much. Why'd you have to go?

He'd left to protect their tribe, by helping the Earth Kingdom fight the Fire Nation. She had to be just as strong. She had to do what was *right*. What Gran-Gran and Mom and the other women would do, faced with people who refused to see what was real and what was crazy. No matter how confused she'd felt last night.

I have to do this. Jinhai's still young enough. Someone might choose to be kind.

It was going to be horrible for him. Knowing you'd lost your mother because she was insane, and your father because he was so lost to his tribe not to *do* anything about it... awful.

Amaya asks for permission? What kind of crazy lie is that?

Katara had soaked up every story her tribe had of waterbenders; everything Gran-Gran and the elders remembered, told and retold around winter fires. Waterbenders protected the tribe. They didn't *need* to ask. What chief would ever tell them no?

She's insane, and she's dragging them with her.

Katara hid a shiver. She'd heard plenty about that, though she'd never been so unlucky as to see it before. Usually everyone *knew* who was sliding away from reality, and sat on them until a healer could treat them. Or do... what had to be done. But those were lone madnesses. It was only in the winter, when one family might be snowbound alone for days, that... bad things could happen.

Horrible things, Katara thought grimly. *Horrible things we have to do to our own people, because there are no benders left to give the Moon's blessing; to heal minds broken by winter, or the midnight sun.*

She still remembered that silent summer day, years ago, when one-not-named didn't come back from gathering. She'd seen the glances and bowed heads of the men coming back from fishing, acknowledging they wouldn't need to... handle the problem. And she'd finally understood why Mom and Gran-Gran had insisted she and Sokka would gather sea plums with them, far away from the other women. With them, and with two little children who should have been with their own mother.

Only they didn't have a mother. And wouldn't, ever again.

She'd *never* forgive the Fire Nation for that.

She didn't know how someone could drag other people crazy in the spring, surrounded by other people, but Meixiang obviously had. Threatening *her* with a knife? The Avatar's teacher? Helping a Dai Li? Helping the *Fire Nation*?

Zuko deserves to go crazy. Spirits, he's already crazy. Just look at him! Tying me up with those pirates and asking me to help get his honor back? Like Aang was just some kind of pelt I'd trade for Mom's necklace?

And now this. Azula in the palace? Not a chance. The whole place would be on fire. And she was standing in it; she'd *probably* notice. So either Zuko was lying, and Iroh swore he wasn't...

Or he was seeing things. And Shirong was seeing them right along with him. Which was exactly what happened when the polar night pried open a family's nightmares.

Zuko's crazy. But... Iroh tried to help. Katara thought about that, and the way a man old enough to be her grandfather had knocked aside armored firebenders like snowmen. *If Zuko's dragging him crazy... we can't have him getting any worse.*

"All I know for sure is that they had a few earthbenders and a lot of blindfolds," Katara stated, looking again at the dozen or so soldiers standing at ease. "And they're working with the enemy. Prince Zuko is somewhere under Ba Sing Se." She winced. "We should probably start at the teashop. The Jasmine Dragon. That's where his uncle was."

"The exiled Fire Nation prince? And *General Iroh*?" How's dark brows shot up. "Oma and Shu! It wasn't just a rumor after all!"

"Rumor?" Katara asked, startled.

"Why, that a team of Fire Nation spies had somehow made it into the Upper Ring," the general declared, brush already stroking swift across paper to craft orders for a suddenly nervous subordinate. "You'd be amazed how much information a skilled saboteur can pick up in a teashop. We should have known something was amiss; skilled tea-makers just don't appear out of the Lower Ring! None of that debris that washes in from the ferries ever has the necessary refinement... Coordinate with the Dai Li, take as many squads as you think you can handle, and seize every employee. And all the customers... well, you know which ones to leave out. If the Dragon of the West is so foolish as to be in plain view, take no chances; if he has any possibility of escape, kill him." He handed the inked order over; the officer bowed, and half the soldiers followed him out.

"You're going to kill him?" Katara said uneasily. She didn't like the old firebender. She wouldn't

mind seeing him locked up in solid rock. For, say, a *week*, so someone had the chance to set him straight about his jerk of a nephew. But... "He tried to save the Moon, once. He's... not all bad." *I'm a healer. Maybe I can save him.*

"He's lethal," General How said flatly. "If the Fire Lord ever convinced him to take the field again, if he ever pulled out of that slump his son's death put him in... Spirits, that was a fortunate fatality for our side. I would *like* to take General Iroh alive. He'd be a valuable source of information. But not worth half an army!"

Half an-? Katara stared at him. "Are you serious? He's just this... harmless old man..."

"That *harmless old man* held our city under siege for six hundred days," General How said bluntly. "I can still see his command tent sitting out there, inside the Outer Wall, *taunting* us..." He snorted, obviously shutting away an infuriating memory. "Infiltrated as Kyoshi Warriors working with the Dai Li, indeed!" He lowered his voice, confidentially. "Of course, we investigated. A threat to the Earth King must be looked into, no matter the source. But one of those so-called spies is laid up in her rooms outside the palace with a stomach flu, and the other two are discussing Kyoshi Island with his majesty. Hardly the behavior of deadly saboteurs!"

"Unless they're really good ones," Katara said reluctantly. Crazy or sane, she wouldn't believe Zuko as far as she could throw him. But before Sokka had left for Chameleon Bay, he'd said that professor's bit about strategy and Chin the Conqueror made sense; and if it weren't for their plans on the eclipse, it'd really make a difference. "Are you sure Long Feng's locked up? That the Earth King's safe?"

"He's in a metal cell," the general said confidently. "No bender can get out of that." He smirked. "But I suppose it wouldn't hurt to go gloat at the man. Perhaps now he'll finally know his place." He waved at the door. "Shall we?"

No one here. Dao over his shoulder, Zuko prowled the empty Upper Ring house, looking for any trace of Toph. He didn't know exactly how Uncle had gotten the address from Katara, but what he'd said about Toph's supposed letter raised the hackles on both their necks. She might not act like it, but Toph Bei Fong was a *lady*. Daughter of a rich and powerful merchant family; Uncle had well recalled the name, from various dealings when their fast but hopelessly antique ship needed yet another repair. General Iroh had the *authority* to requisition parts and supplies, but reality was a little trickier. Between Zuko's own exile and the emergencies suffered by a ship combing the far corners of the world... sometimes it was just easier to deal with Earth Kingdom merchants. They hadn't pulled Gaoling as a potential site out of a hat.

So he knew about upper class merchants. And what Uncle had learned about that letter was just *wrong*.

Katara said the letter was addressed to Toph. But Toph's blind.

A respectable merchant lady always remembered the proprieties. The letter should have had salutations not meant for its recipient, but for its *reader*.

Of such fine details were made clan intrigue, and the narrowed glance in the war room, and death.

We could be wrong. I hope we're wrong. Even if that means I left Shirong with... with what I helped the spirits do to him, just for a wild turken-geese chase.

Though he'd also left Shirong with Amaya. He had to be grateful for that, even if he really, really wanted to kick some spirit's tail for making him an unwitting accomplice.

"I still don't know what happened," Amaya had admitted earlier that morning, examining Shirong's chi in fine detail. "I've healed wounds almost as deep before, and I've never had any other bender claimed by the Moon..." She'd frowned, thinking. "The haima-jiao's injuries... you told him to fight?"

"Not exactly, but..."

Amaya glanced at Shirong. "And when I first touched Zuko's spirit with water to heal him, he accepted for his uncle's sake. For family."

"He reached for water, and I reached for fire." The agent shook his head, face set in the kind of numb shock Zuko was all too familiar with. "Are you saying we did this to ourselves?"

"No!" Zuko exploded. Grabbed Shirong's shoulder, forcing shocked eyes to meet his. "You didn't ask for this! *I* didn't ask for this! This isn't your fault!"

"But your uncle did ask for a way to save your people," Amaya said quietly beside them. "And as he is your family, who loves you... the Moon could answer that plea." She looked at Shirong. "What did you ask Agni for?"

Shirong glanced at Zuko, and looked away. "Something I shouldn't have."

Zuko let go, and took a careful step back. "Because you knew I was Fire Nation. And we've been your enemies for a century." He nodded, knowing what tore the man. Spirits, he knew it too well. "You knew it was treason."

"I suppose I did," Shirong said bleakly. "But who can live without the sun?" He shook his head. "I've cursed your nation for years. But Agni himself? No. I didn't have any fondness for him or his, true... yet there you were, trying to put right what Long Feng had set wrong. And I couldn't help. *I'm* Dai Li. It should have been *my* responsibility. So... I prayed. I *prayed* that you would get the help you needed, for all our sakes." He laughed once, bitter. "I've dealt with spirits all my life. I should have known better."

Heartbreak. Zuko could hear it in Shirong's voice, the same depthless pain he'd felt realizing Azula didn't love him, *couldn't* love him, not the way brother and sister were supposed to care about each other...

He didn't need Amaya's sober look to act. "I'm not sorry."

Shirong looked up, startled out of gloom.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," Zuko went on. "I didn't want to get anyone... caught between, like I am. When you're not sure what to do or say or even *be* next. I didn't mean to do that to you. But I did it. I gave the spirits an opening. It's my responsibility." He paused, and let out a breath. "And I'm *not* sorry for saving your life."

Shirong started to speak. Hesitated. Glanced at Amaya. "You've only had him for a month?"

"Some people are born to destroy," Amaya said simply. "Others learn to build, and heal. No matter what it costs them." She smiled wryly. "I don't think either of you are traitors. But I was born to water, and you are my family now. So I think I'll let you two work this out."

Shirong watched her turn the corner out of earshot, and sighed.

"You're not a traitor," Zuko stated, before the man could dig himself any deeper into pain. "I'm not here to take the city. I don't want to damage the Earth Kingdom. Uncle and I are *fugitives*." He smirked. "If the Fire Lord wants us captured, wouldn't it be more treacherous to help him?"

"Are firebenders supposed to use logic?" Shirong said archly.

"You'd be surprised," Zuko said dryly. "Just because we *want* to jump into a fight, doesn't mean we-

Oh.

Zuko let out a slow breath. "It took days for things to settle down in my head," he said honestly. "I'm still surprised a little, sometimes. You're - are you having trouble with your temper?"

"No," Shirong said quietly. "Not temper, exactly. I suppose that's why I didn't realize something was wrong before." He shivered a little. "I've felt - are you always this *sure*? This... spirits, I don't even know how to describe it..."

"Determination," Zuko nodded, relieved. "This is what I want. This is what I *won't* do. Yes." He sighed. "You have to be careful what you want. It's what drives you. Fuel for the fire. So if you're smart, every day you stop and meditate. Clear the noise out. You have to know what you want, and why you want it. Otherwise you can run right off a cliff." He grimaced. "Uncle can tell you about the time I ran a Fire Navy blockade to chase the Avatar."

Shirong eyed him.

Sometimes I'm an idiot? Zuko almost said. But Shirong's distress was too raw. Too familiar. "It'll get better," he promised. "You're still you. Just... focused a little different."

"I want to be angry with you," Shirong admitted. "I want to be angry at *something*. But it's like cursing an earthquake. It happened. What I knew is over. And it's... oddly fitting, in a way. How many lives have I shattered, serving Long Feng? At least I still have my own life, and my own mind."

Zuko winced. "You should be angry. I would have been, if I hadn't been in shock. If I hadn't... realized..." He swallowed, and had to look away.

"You can't be the heir," Shirong breathed. "You did lie to Mai."

"No," Zuko said wearily. "Azula needs me dead. The Fire Sages aren't stupid. Terrified of her and Father... but they'd have a window if Fire Lord Ozai were dead, and she knows it. She'd pretty much have to prove in front of a whole war meeting I was a waterbender before they'd stop trying to weasel out of it. It's *so* much easier just to kill me." He lowered his head. "If I were crowned, and the waterbending came out - and you know it would, you can't hide your element - it'd be *worse* than letting Azula take the throne. Everybody would flock to her, appalled by the *tainted* exile." Zuko drew a breath. "It's better this way. I've lost... what I thought I wanted. I can't save the Fire Nation." He looked Shirong straight in the eye. "But I can save part of it. With Uncle's plan, we can make somewhere for the people who don't fit."

"Your plan," Shirong stated. Tone mild, but gaze intense as high noon.

"Our plan," Zuko admitted. Thought about what he'd said, and who he'd said it to, and wanted to kick himself. "It's not going to be another Fire Nation colony. Not if I can help it."

"Oh?" Shirong lifted a brow. "You intend to evacuate Fire Nation refugees."

"And their families," Zuko said firmly. "Professor Tingzhe's students; he's already working on a list of people we can trust. And the Dai Li families. I was *serious*. Azula wants to take Ba Sing Se? She'll probably take it. But we don't have to make it *easy*."

Shirong looked pensive. "I'd say you were a hopeless idealist to think Earth and Fire could coexist, if I didn't have blatant proof we can. And still... I've never wanted to be anything other than a loyal subject of Earth King Kuei."

"So what's the best thing a loyal subject can do?" Zuko said soberly. "Fight a losing battle here? Or fall back and regroup, so when Azula leaves, you have a chance to take the city *back*?"

Shirong frowned.

"I need you," Zuko said simply. "Who else is going to train Min, if we get him back? He wants to be Dai Li. He *should* be Dai Li, doing what you were always meant to do: protect your people from kamuji malice. Who else is going to understand how torn up he is? Born to Earth, a brother to Fire... He's in the same mess you are. And he's hurt, and confused, and... young."

Shirong regarded him narrowly. Leaned back against stone, a ghost of a smile flitting across his face. "You *are* like your uncle."

Zuko blinked.

"When it comes to the safety of your people, you don't fight fair."

Zuko reddened. "A great name must be noble, and benevolent, and honorable beyond reproach," he quoted old lessons, "because the great names lead and defend the clans in war. And war is *none* of those. War is *death*."

Shirong nodded slowly. "So if you'd been in command at the North Pole...."

"Send out the Avatar to provide cover from the air, and have the waterbenders hole each ship below the waterline," Zuko said simply. "You can't fire catapults when your ship is *sinking*."

Shirong eyed him.

"We were on a raft for *three weeks*," Zuko said, cross. "There's only so many times you can count the sea vultures."

Which was when Shirong had started *laughing*.

I hope he's all right, Zuko thought now, circling into the front room he'd previously avoided. *He said he was all right-*

There was scarring on the floor.

Zuko froze. Scanned the room at eye level. Dropped into a crouch, and scanned it again. Looked down bare inches from the floor, and stepped with the same light, silent tread he'd use to elude alert guards.

No tripwires. That you see. Don't get cocky.

He circled the gouged wood, just close enough to confirm the pattern of interlocking metal teeth. *A trap box!*

Looking up, he could see where the pulley and counterweights had been attached near the ceiling. It took an effort of will not to sear the marked beams.

"She's alive," Zuko made himself whisper. "You've got to assume she's alive."

It was the most logical conclusion. You didn't trap a bender in a big iron box if you *didn't* want them alive. Not when there were so many easier ways to end a bender's threat... permanently.

In his mind's eyes Zuko could see half a dozen of them, all ending with Toph lying pale and still in crimson. She was so *small*....

You have to believe she's alive.

Zuko swallowed dryly, and forced himself to study scarred planks. *Not fresh. Probably a few days old.*

Which meant Toph had gotten her letter and walked straight into a trap, and he was going to see Long Feng *burn* for this....

And Katara didn't even notice. His fists clenched, sparks flickering to life before he snuffed them. *Why am I not even surprised?*

Time. He was working against time.

Need to find the owner, or a neighbor, Zuko thought, slipping out and up onto the roof for a moment to think. *Someone had to pay to rent this place. And someone's going to be mad as hell about that floor.*

He had to move fast. Spending any more time aboveground than he had to was risky. The dao gave him a silhouette that Azula shouldn't recognize - but if she got close enough, that wouldn't matter. Though at least the Dai Li seemed to be ignoring him. Either that, or he really had done a good job sneaking today.

Sure. And what are the odds of that.... Oh no. Agni, please, no.

But it looked like the spirits were sticking their shimmery little fingers in their ears, because the Avatar's bison was on a direct heading for the palace.

That... that idiotic, blinder than Toph, insane-

He couldn't afford to white out from rage. *Could not.*

Breathe. Focus. Think of Toph.

Which both helped, and didn't. Toph considered that airbending idiot a friend. And maybe she understood temporary alliances... but a friend was a friend.

Not my problem. I need to get my people out. He's the Avatar. He can handle Azula.

Except it wouldn't just be Azula. It'd be Azula and the Dai Li. And those earthbenders were used to fighting spiritual power.

It won't be enough. I've seen him in the Avatar State. Even Dai Li won't be enough-

"If the world learned one of the royal family killed an Avatar...."

Uncle's voice, ringing through memory like a death knell. Zuko held his head in his hands, and shivered.

This is a bad idea. Worse than breaking into Pohuai Stronghold. Worse than breaking into the North Pole - and you got damn lucky just to live through that one. Don't do this, it's not worth it-

Aang was going to kill his sister.

Simple logic. Azula would think she had overwhelming force. Might actually *have* it, for once. And she was bound and determined to prove herself the worthy heir to the throne. To show she could succeed, brilliantly, where her brother had only failed. She *would* kill the Avatar.

And if she didn't, the Avatar would kill her.

"You're a big brother...."

Zuko swallowed hard. Closed his eyes, and remembered the chill wind off an icy sea, and the burning focus that had let him face a polar night with only a kayak, rope, and his wits.

First, I need to find a messenger. Then....

I'm sorry, Uncle. I tried.

Long Feng frowned at him as Quan opened the metal-sheathed cell, glancing past him to the guards studiously ignoring the whole affair. "Isn't this a bit premature? Unless the Earth King has reconsidered his sentence, based on new evidence."

"Not exactly," Quan said warily. "Sir, I have reason to believe you and his majesty may be in grave danger."

"In danger?" Long Feng stepped out onto welcoming stone with unhurried grace. "Is the Fire Nation Princess not cooperating?"

"More than cooperating," Quan said bluntly, heading down the corridor toward the surface. "She's really taken charge. She's terrifying and inspirational all at the same time. It's hard to explain." He met that calculating green gaze, worried. "Sir... I think some of the other agents are slipping."

"Slipping?" Long Feng said archly, matching him stride for stride.

"I said it was hard to explain." Quan shook his head. "She... I'd swear she's not spirit-touched. But there's *something*. I don't like it, sir. I just don't." He hesitated, picking his words. "And I was just able to confirm information I obtained from one of Shirong's former contacts. General Iroh has been declared a traitor to the Fire Nation, and there's a bounty on his head. Prince Zuko has *not* been declared a traitor... but there's a bounty on his head, as well." Quan gave his superior a sober look. "Not a reward for capture, sir. The Fire Lord wants them *dealt with*. And Princess Azula's already made one attempt."

Long Feng almost hesitated. "She attempted to assassinate her own uncle?" His voice lowered, as he opened stone above them to rise into the palace. "Devious girl."

"I know Army Intelligence states that the Dragon of the West was shattered by his son's death," Quan said deliberately. "But that she tried to deal with him, and he was apparently unable to turn the tables on her... I have doubts about allowing this person to remain near our king."

"Do you," a precise voice purred from the shadows, gold eyes glinting above the princess' outfit of Dai Li green. "My, whatever would those be?"

"Katara's fine," the Earth King reassured them. "You have nothing to worry about."

Sokka eyed him, and the bear, and wondered if they were living on the same continent. Between the Fire Nation outside and the Dai Li inside, how could anybody in the city be fine?

"But in my vision... I was so sure she was in trouble." Aang was trying not to fidget, Sokka could see that; just as clearly as he could see Aang wanted to snap open his airstaff and fly off *somewhere*.

"Well, she met with the Council of Generals to plan the invasion," the Earth King said thoughtfully. "Then she was gone most of yesterday, I think off with your friends, the Kyoshi Warriors... but one of my staff just brought me a message from General How. He said some of his troops needed to perform a flanking maneuver and conquer a teashop, and he and Katara were going to question Long Feng again." The young king frowned, nudging up his glasses. "I wonder if the general needs a day off. Why would you need troops to storm a teashop?"

Toph winced.

Sokka cleared his throat. "Some of your Earth Rumble buddies in town?"

"I don't think so," Toph said innocently. "I haven't seen any of them."

"Oh, good. Then I guess- Why do you keep *doing* that?"

Toph grinned at him.

The Earth King chuckled behind his hand. "She couldn't know either way, Sokka. The Jasmine Dragon only opened a few days ago. Or so the message said."

And Toph winced *again*. Though Sokka was pretty sure anybody who didn't know her wouldn't have noticed a thing. It was the way she tried to look just a *little* more innocent, helpless little blind girl.

Okay. Now I know she's up to something.

Then again, last time what she'd been up to had been Appa, so-

"I'll go check on Katara," Aang said in a rush. "Just to make sure." A gust of wind, and he was out the massive doors.

"Okay, spill," Sokka said seriously, once the dust settled. "I know you felt like you had to get Appa back yourself, and I guess I can't blame Lee for wanting to stay out of Katara's icicle range. But I want to help this time."

"You know Lee?" The Earth King looked interested. So did Bosco, in a slightly nervous and trying to seem innocent way. "No, I suppose there are thousands of Lees..."

"Waterbender, breaks out sky bison, Fire Nation?" Sokka said wryly. "Probably not many of those."

"Fire Nation?" The king stood, alarmed. "That's impossible! Amaya would never help our enemies."

And if he were dangerous, Bosco's animal instinct would have sensed it."

"Really? Wow, that's cool!" A Kyoshi Warrior somersaulted across the room, landing bare inches away from Sokka, smiling wide as Toph. "Didn't expect you back so soon, cutie."

"Uh, I'm kind of involved with..." The walls opened and spilled Dai Li, and Sokka swallowed, even as Toph raised her fists and got behind him. "Suki?"

It was hard to tell under the warpaint, but he thought she looked surprised. "Who?"

Oh, this is not good...

Getting the bad guys to turn on each other seems so easy when Sokka does it! Katara retreated back down the corridor, dodging, water a shimmering arc in front of her. "But that's *Azula!* You've got to know she's after the city for the Fire Nation-"

A wave of deadly azure blazed toward her head; only a hasty whip of water deflected it enough for her to duck.

How can she fight when there's no room in here-!

Momo squeaked, soaring off to squirm behind a wind-ruffled tapestry. Sweating, the waterbender flung a razor-sharp ring of liquid, clipping a strand of black hair. She'd always fought Zuko in the open, where she had plenty of room for sweeping moves that shaped water into weapons. Where she could keep the scary, armored firebender at a *distance*. The most close-in she'd ever really had to fight Zuko had been in the Spirit Oasis, and there...

Azula didn't care how close the walls were. The princess could punch and kick from every angle, shooting flame that sliced down the corridor with blistering heat.

She's going to boil away everything I've got. There's got to be more water around here somewhere... maybe a well outside?

A yell, a rumble of stone; General How was down, trapped in the Dai Li agent's iron chains and Long Feng's sink of stone. And with him immobilized, they were looking at her...

Three on one wasn't just not fair. It was *terrifying*.

Bits of stone gloves zipped past her, lethal as arrows; Azula's blasts kept *coming-*

The curtains she'd thought were just another tapestry blasted open in a gust of wind, and Aang was there. "Katara! You're okay! Long Feng's not in his- Whoa!"

Smirking, Azula pounced.

Chapter End Notes

The Water Tribe has warriors. The Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom have soldiers. The gap in ethics and acceptable tactics between the two can be as wide as the Great Divide... which is an episode worth looking at more closely. Instead of comparing

notes on the two Earth Kingdom tribes, Katara and Sokka are each fiercely partisan toward the people who fed and sheltered them. And Katara's been in Ba Sing Se for a month, dependent on the largesse of people who, Long Feng implies, are hurting Aang by keeping Appa away from him. The cognitive dissonance, plus reminders of her mother in the time of year, has to be twisting her right around the bend.

On that note, let's speak of madness... and evil.

In the very first episode, Sokka refers to midnight sun madness. In fact, humans have an extremely difficult time dealing with polar winter and summer. Your average person needs a fairly steady day and night cycle to stay healthy. It's built into our biology, in the form of the circadian rhythm (alias, the biological clock). Someone whose ancestors came from more southerly climes moving to, say, Alaska, puts a fair amount of stress on their body. That can exacerbate all kinds of bad things, such as heart disease and mental illness.

Some northern people, such as the Inuit (Eskimos), can get around that particular stress, because their biological clock is broken. Physically, the months of complete darkness and midnight sun of summer have far less impact on them.

Mentally, though, is a whole 'nother Pandora's Box.

The legend of the Wendigo, a fearsome, once-human cannibal, originated around the Arctic Circle for good reason. *Wendigo* is as valid a diagnosis in the Far North as fox madness is in Japan, or changeling was in Ireland and Scotland up into the 1800s.

And susceptibility to mental illness often runs in families.

Follow, if you will, the chain of logic. Fred down the road killed his neighbors and ate them. Most of us would agree Fred is Evil. The solution, in a world without insane asylums, is obvious: Kill Fred. Problem solved.

Except ten or twenty years down the road, Fred's *children* crack, and also become cannibals. Whoops.

Now add, oh, a few centuries of observation and oral tradition that gee, this happens over and over...

Tribes are built to survive, on the ragged edge. Never mistake *tribal* for *nice*. Tribes can't afford nice.

And so, consensus emerges: Evil people have evil children. Handle the problem. Before good people die.

Zuko does not see the world the way the Water Tribe does. By Katara's standards, Zuko *is* insane.

Interestingly, this would affect the Northern Water Tribe far less than the Southern. Despite its name, the Northern Tribe can't be nearly as close to the North Pole as the Southern is to the south. In the opening eps of Avatar, the sun never sets, indicating complete polar summer when it's still weeks before their (southern hemisphere) summer solstice. The Siege of the North is maybe two months after the northern hemisphere winter solstice, and yet they already have the sun coming up on a regular basis, long enough for the Fire Navy to attack for hours before withdrawing for the

night. Besides waterbenders, the Northern Tribe also has politics, an indication beyond the other obvious wealth of the city that they do have spare resources; a necessary buffer if you're going to try and help someone who's ill instead of protect yourself with lethal force.

Katara is not being immature. Katara is being very mature, by her tribe's standards. Mature women - and this is usually the women, not the men - decide who the tribe can save... and who has to die.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Iroh studied the two asleep in the sunlight, young man holding a blanket-wrapped young lady, and had to smile. Even in the darkest hour of Ba Sing Se, hope could flower. "Good morning, Mai. Min."

The boy's head shot up first, no surprise; but Min barely spent a second gaping at him before ducking back down to listen to Mai's breathing-

"Oh," Iroh breathed, dropping to one knee beside them to check her pulse, and feel a feverish forehead. "Oh, Mai. Never would he have asked this of you."

"I know," Mai whispered hoarsely, rings under her eyes as she looked at him. "That's why I did it." She blinked. "General. You shouldn't be here."

"I may not have my nephew's skill at sneaking, but I was not seen," Iroh assured her. Smiled gently. "Rest, now. The worst is over. You will feel chilled for some days, and... fragile. But your will was strong, and your need great. It was enough."

Mai blinked again, eyes suddenly wide. "You...?"

"How else could I have broken the siege of Ba Sing Se? Azulon wished it burned, if it would not surrender." Iroh regarded Min soberly. "I know one does not survive the crisis alone. We are in your debt. So I am pleased to be able to tell you your family is well; though arranging for Jinhai to greet the sun will require some degree of care. Are you well?"

"I... but... you..." Min stammered. "I'm... sorry?"

"A good start," Iroh said dryly. "Fortunately, I have some experience with desperate young men." He raised a mildly scolding finger. "Do not do it again."

"No, sir." Min swallowed. "You're General Iroh?"

"Retired," Iroh said simply. "I was a different man, then. I hope I am a better one now." He handed the young man a scrap of paper. "Memorize those, destroy it, and scatter the ashes. One of those names should be able to help you contact your family, whatever you decide." He regarded Mai. "As for you, young lady. Your calligraphy is still to court standards?"

"My parents would accept nothing less," she said evenly.

Ah, poor girl. At least his nephew had the leisure to *hit* things, once in a while. "Then you will need new brushes, if you remain here," Iroh nodded. "Perhaps you might ask Min for advice on certain shops. Or, if not, I am certain Agent Quan would know." He shrugged. "Or, of course, Azula might simply order some brought to the palace."

Mai nodded slowly. "I understand."

"I don't," Min said warily.

Mai smiled slightly. "You are innocent. It's kind of cute." She reached up to flick the tip of his

braid. "The general just identified three likely power centers. If I decide to pick one to ally with."

"Oh, right," Min nodded. Frowned. "Huh?"

"We'll talk politics later," Mai promised. Glanced at Iroh again. "I can't abandon Ty Lee. And she's..."

"She may not be so loyal to Azula as you believe," Iroh said mildly. "Let us say, you are not the only one with irregularities in your genealogy."

Mai lifted a black brow, obviously poised to ask more-

"Message for Mushi!" a sing-song voice called. Knocked briefly at the apartment door; then a dusty runner, one of many messengers in Ba Sing Se, pattered inside, still panting a bit from the stairs. "There a Mushi in here? I better have gotten the right address... well, *hello*, sweetie-"

Steel gleamed between Mai's fingers. "You're looking for him."

The runner gulped, and turned toward Iroh with a weak grin. "Ah, your nephew didn't have time to write it down, so... he said the bison's heading for the palace."

Iroh felt the world drop out from under him. *No, not so soon, we are not ready-*

"Oh, and he's going to do something stupidly heroic," the runner nodded.

Iroh clapped a hand to his forehead in disbelief.

"No," Mai said, voice edged with dread. "He *wouldn't*."

"I kind of think he would," Min gulped.

Iroh sighed. And smiled at the runner. Who paled, and started backing up.

"Forgive me for the unpleasantness," Iroh said politely, snagging the man by the collar before he could escape. "But I fear I will need a distraction."

There's got to be some way to distract her! Determined, Sokka pitched Boomerang in what should look like a near miss-

Giggling, Ty Lee dodged it. And cart-wheeled at him again as he dodged her, leaping and poking and jumping again as Boomerang hit a pillar, then the wall, then another pillar, and whistled through air straight back-

Ty Lee swirled around it as it sang through, flirting with the razor edge like a kid dashing into summer surf. "It's like we're dancing together!"

Surreal, Sokka decided. Grabbing Boomerang, and trying not to listen too hard to the crunches as Toph swatted Dai Li like a polar dog in the middle of a swarm of weevil-rats. She was better than any of them, but he had a bad feeling she might not be better than *all* of them. *I'm just a guy with a boomerang*, he thought desperately. *I didn't ask for crazy spirit magic, and saving the world, and bouncy... sort of evil... crazy girls.*

Fighting Ty Lee was like fighting a nightmare. Not the silly ones he told Katara about, where penguins sang and food ate people. The frustrating, serious ones, where he was just try to get Aang

to slow down, slow down and *listen*...

Toph backed into him. Deliberately, given her listening feet. "Don't start seeing dancing mushrooms on me, Snoozles!"

"Hey, the cactus juice wasn't my fault!" Sokka protested. "Um. Kind of?"

...Were those Dai Li *snickering*?

Oh, that is just not fair. I'm from the South Pole! It was a plant! Plants have water in them!

Although the cactus juice was water the way Ty Lee's cute little fists were punches, and a smart man stayed away from both of them, 'cause here she came *again*.

And somewhere in the middle of the punching and dodging and rocks sailing around like crazy avalanches, there was a quieter rumble of stone, and a cleared throat. "I'm sorry, your majesty. But given the situation with the generals and Princess Azula, I have to get you to safety."

"What?" the Earth King yelped. "Put me down! Bosco!"

"Grr-yipe!"

Stone flipped over, taking bear, king, and one apologetic Dai Li with it.

Which just leaves a dozen or so, and Ty Lee, Sokka thought, skittering back to bounce off a pillar a few seconds before Ty Lee's jabbing fingers could intersect his shoulder. "So much for animal instinct. Trade you?"

"Sure," Toph gritted out. "I'll take Bouncy, and *you* can stop rocks with your head!"

Point. Oh man, this was *so* not good.

Where the heck is Aang?

Tumbling out through wind-blasted curtains into the palace courtyard, Katara *reached* toward the hole in earth Aang had opened with a strike of his staff-

Water!

She pulled up a wave, smashing it down on Azula-

Blue fire erupted. Steam had barely cleared before whirling disks of azure flame sliced through, aiming for her heart.

Go ahead and grin, Katara thought defiantly, sliding fire aside with walls of ice as Aang hopped, air-blasted, and earth-trapped various Dai Li. *We're in the open now. We can beat you.*

Weird. Fighting Azula was terrifying... but she felt *so* much better. For weeks she'd behaved, behaved, *behaved* in Ba Sing Se; hemmed in by rules and smiles like a brook channeled meek and mild into the fields outside the Inner Wall. Now she was riding the strength of the waves, of the ocean itself...

And no one was going to tell her *Azula* wasn't evil.

She might get hurt. She might die. But she was fighting for her family, and herself. Azula was going *down*.

Oh. And while she was at it, she just might save Ba Sing Se, too. And then she and Aang could sit on General How, and lock Zuko up somewhere safe, and talk Iroh onto *their* side. Who said Sokka was the only one who could make plans?

Katara whipped a flying rock-glove into mud, and slung the whole mess back toward Azula. Who ducked... but not *quite* enough.

Mud splattered over the pristine green uniform, and gold eyes narrowed in fury.

Katara stuck her tongue out.

And just missed biting it, as Azula kicked and punched a fiery blizzard of blasts her way. *This isn't going to be easy...*

But it looked like she'd finally gotten the Fire Princess *mad*. And like Master Pakku had told her, anger was a weapon in your *opponent's* hand, not yours. A waterbender raged, but it was the ocean's rage; cold and cruel and merciless, dragging the foe down. Not the quick, hot flares she'd seen from Zuko, there and gone like a cascade of fireworks-

Like fire.

Uh-oh. Maybe this wasn't a good idea-

Azula leapt and whirled, heel striking earth to blast a wave of fire Katara's way, and there was no more time to think.

If these were regular Army earthbenders, or even the palace guard, Toph was sure she would have flattened them all minutes ago. As it was...

Dai Li are good. Really, really good.

The rock gloves, the earth shoes - they blended into stone, making the wearers feel more like ants moving across the earth than people. Which didn't stop her; Toph could *feel* ants moving. But trying to concentrate on tremors her bending told her should be one size, while her head told her they were a lot bigger... ugh. It was easier to read the earth they were bending instead. Which meant she was reacting, not flattening them first. She *hated* that.

Worse, Sokka was getting tired. She could feel it in his breath, in how heavy his steps were getting. And if Ty Lee put him out - well, that was it. She'd have to cut her losses, drag Snoozles out on moving earth with her, and hope they could make it to Appa.

Gloves zipped at her like flutter-hornets. Toph slammed up a wall, crooking her fingers in to yank that rock deeper into her own stone. Chi fighting chi. Bending against bending. And she was better than them, she was the *best*. But there were too many.

Guys. I know I like to take care of myself. But I could really, really use some help right now...

Running footsteps. Familiar ones.

No way!

Oh yeah. Toph grinned like a fiend; fingers, fists and feet a symphony of shattered rock-gloves and pillars and sailing shields of stone. She couldn't see the flames, but she felt the blast of heat, and heard the fiery roar and shouts of dismay from agents swept aside by something that flexed and crackled.

"You!" Sokka yelped.

"No, don't!" Toph felt Sokka throw, stamped up a shielding wall, feeling Boomerang clatter off stone.

Ty Lee giggled.

She's in the air, I can't see her-

"Down!"

Toph dropped. Felt Zuko's hand push her farther down and away, heard Ty Lee's yelp, Zuko's grunt-

Fire went out.

But Ty Lee was on the ground, *everyone* was on the ground, and without earth shoes shielding muscle twitches and breathing from the rocks, she *knew* where they were-

Stomp and thrust her arms up, pillars of earth pinning every enemy to the ceiling. Cup her fingers and slash, curving up and down, growing pillars and ceiling together like stalactites and stalagmites.

Toph dusted her hands off, and grinned. *Nobody* was getting out of *that* on their own.

"Ah, Toph?" Sokka said warily, picking up Boomerang. "You missed a bad guy."

"No, I didn't." Toph stalked over to where Zuko was swearing under his breath, and planted her fists on her hips. "That was *so dumb!*"

"No." Zuko gritted his teeth, obviously biting back even worse language. "Tactical sacrifice. You're a master bender. And if you can't bend, you can't see." He took a deep breath, braced himself-

And *stood up*.

"You- how- what?" Sokka sputtered.

"Wow." Ty Lee's voice held rueful admiration. "You didn't forget a thing!"

"Trust me, Ty Lee. You're unforgettable." Zuko took a step, and hissed. "Agni, that always-" He bit it off.

"Well, it wouldn't hurt if you didn't dodge-" Ty Lee gasped. "Oh. Your face... I didn't know it was..."

"Yeah, yeah, we've all seen it before," Sokka said impatiently. "You *do* know each other! Where's Katara?"

"With General How," Zuko said impatiently. "I hope. Unless she didn't listen to Uncle, and did something stupid... Of *course* we know each other! She went to school with my sister. You

remember my sister? Who's not exiled? Who wants to kill you, and me, and Aang, and probably half the Earth Kingdom if she can get away with it?" Steel rang, as Zuko drew his blades and turned toward the shouts of guards just a few corridors away.

Sokka yelped. Tried to disguise it as a manly cough. "Since when do firebenders use swords, oh high and mighty jerkbender?"

"Since I keep ending up in disasters where I *can't bend*." Zuko leaned back enough to look Ty Lee in the eye. "Where is she, Ty Lee? Where's Azula?"

Outside, something exploded.

"...Forget I asked."

The element of adaptability, indeed, Azula thought, smirking behind her facade of rage as she attacked Katara again, her loyal Dai Li holding off the Avatar. *Oh, please. Her attacks are right out of the textbooks.*

Give the ex-general and traitor that much credit. While Iroh had been a loyal soldier under Azulon's command, he'd gone to great lengths to study the remaining bending styles of their enemies. His compiled observations were still useful tactical manuals, so long as you ignored all the cultural musing junk mixed in.

On top of that, the little waterbender still fought as if she were facing a smaller, lighter version of Zuko. A firebender with no skill, no perfect economy of form and motion, and a temper explosive as blasting jelly.

Disgusting. But oh, so useful.

Simply "slip", a little. Send a few fireballs slightly awry. Allow her face to show some of the narrowed eyes and flared nostrils of a firebender in a tooth-grinding rage...

Ah. Yes. There was the betraying smirk, on the water peasant's face. And... yes. Now Katara was starting to take the offensive, hurling razor ring-waves of water that clipped hair and a robe's fringe, forcing Azula back.

Just where Azula wanted her.

Airbenders are pacifists, little girl. Have you thought about that? Do you know what dagger is drawn at your back, and his, every time you fight?

No, the waterbender didn't know. She couldn't even guess. She would have crafted her battle strategies against firebenders based on facing *Zuko*. And the Avatar would never have hesitated to fight Zuko. Master airbenders, the ancient scrolls said, knew the truth from lies...

And the disgusting truth about Zuko was, he never wanted to kill anyone.

Weakling.

A slash of the Avatar's airstaff sent Long Feng flying into a wall. Bone snapped.

Yes!

Sacrifice one tile to win it all; Azula *saw* the airbender flinch from the injury, gray eyes seeking out

the young girl who mothered him-

Cool and calculated, Azula stepped into the line of Katara's water whip.

The world slowed.

Water arced at her like ribbons of ice.

Azula breathed deep, calm as the heartbeat before flashover.

The airbender saw oncoming death - death about to be dealt by someone he *loved* - and leapt into the air to escape reality. Turning his back. Just for an instant.

Perfect.

Flames blasting her back out of the arc, Azula parted yin and yang. And let cold fire fly.

"He can't be dead," Sokka gulped as they ran, Toph's moving earth carrying them past guards and Dai Li too fast for most to do more than try wild strikes. In his mind's eye, he could still see that small smoking figure fall. "He can't be dead, he can't-"

"Toph," Zuko said grimly.

"Way ahead of you," the earthbender nodded, yanking hands apart to drop them all into a pit-tunnel, and would she mind *warning* a guy first?

No. Not all of them. "Zuko!" Toph hissed up at the sky.

"You're going to need a distraction."

"What?" Sokka yelped.

"Dai Li don't read the ground," Toph told him. "Not as good as me, anyway. If we go underground-"

"We can get right to them and call Appa," Sokka realized. "Good plan." He glared at her. "Except for the part about trusting *Zuko* to distract Crazy Blue Fire over there!"

"Oh, she wants to kill me *way* more than she wants to kill you." Zuko's smirk had a bitter edge. "It'll work."

"Oh yeah," Sokka nodded, glaring up at the opening. "Except for the *tiny* detail that gee, you *can't bend*." He flung his hands up. "She'll fry you in under a minute!"

"Solves all your problems, doesn't it?" The smirk didn't change. "Move fast."

"Are you *nuts*?!" Sokka demanded. And why was Toph looking like that, sad and scared and biting her lip?

Zuko took a deep breath, and let it sigh out, smirk fading into something that looked... sad. And determined. "Sokka. Your sister wouldn't listen, but... If the Avatar dies, my people die. Because the next Avatar will be *Water Tribe*."

Well, yeah, so he'd heard, though he didn't like to think about- Oh. *Oh*.

The North Pole, Sokka realized. *It'd be that all over again. Everybody knows the Fire Nation is evil. They don't know Iroh, or Jeong Jeong, or that old man who believed me in Gaipan. If the Fire Nation killed Aang, killed the Avatar, there'd only be one way to stop them...*

"I'd stop them, Sparky," Toph whispered.

"I know you'd try." Zuko smiled at her, faint as a ghost. "Tell Uncle... tell him I said to look after you, okay? For him." His face hardened. "Go!"

And Toph had Sokka's hand, and the earth *moved*.

"That jerk's going to die on us," Sokka breathed, as Toph collapsed the tunnel behind them and burrowed them through the ground like the badger-moles who'd taught her. "He's... it doesn't make sense! He hates Aang!"

"No, he doesn't." Toph sniffled, and set her jaw. "He told the truth, Sokka. And that's why we're going back for him." She swallowed. "After we get Aang."

"We're going to *wha-?*" Sokka choked on a mouthful of earth. Spit it out, and decided maybe he'd just shut up for a minute.

Toph wanted one jerk of a firebender? Fine. First they'd get Aang and Katara, *then* they'd call Appa and see if Azula had left any pieces to pick up.

And maybe somewhere in there, the world would start making sense again.

Some kind of water-octopus? Zuko wondered, seeing translucent tentacles lash at any threatening Dai Li as Katara hovered protectively over the fallen Avatar. *Don't know that form...*

It didn't matter. There was only one form he had to get right, exactly right - or nothing would matter, ever again.

If he could. There was barely a trickle of chi moving when he breathed, and even what he'd learned from Amaya about lightning-injuries might not be enough...

Zuko stepped into clear view, swords still drawn, and let his voice carry. "Azula."

She started, as if surprised. Turned toward him with a half-smile, gold eyes calculating. "Zuko. How fitting to find you here, in our moment of triumph-"

"You mean the Fire Lord's moment of triumph." Zuko kept his gaze off battling water, and waiting Dai Li. If Uncle was right, nothing he could say would sway those loyal to Azula. But given what Quan had done, and Bon...

Some of them might listen. Maybe.

Twenty yards. Zuko stopped in settling dust. *Close enough she'll think I'll try to rush her. Far enough she's sure she can stop me.*

"Father's triumphs are ours, Zuko. After all, we are his *humble servants*."

Zuko saw that hint of a cruel smirk, and shook his head. "That's the only way you could do it, isn't it? The only way you could stand wearing an honorable uniform. You played with Kuei, the same way you did cricket-mice." He clicked his dao together, sheathing them. "Only instead of legs,

you're going to tear off his hopes."

He saw agents tense in his peripheral vision, braced himself to *move*-

Azula held up a hand, halting them. "You look tired, brother." Gold eyes were shadowed with concern. "Life as a fugitive can't have been easy. But your quest is over. We've won. We have the Avatar. Your honor will be restored, and Father will welcome you. You can rest now. You can *come home*."

Spirits, she knew him so well. He *knew* she was lying. And he still wanted to believe...

Always remember who you are.

Time to see if I really can irritate anything. Zuko drew a breath, and settled into the deceptively easy stance. "Mom loved you."

Gold narrowed, just for an instant. "Mom's gone, Zuko. We have to obey and please Father now. And he *will* be pleased-"

"She asked me to protect you."

Azula smiled, humoring him. "That was a little too much to ask, given you were exiled on pain of death if you ventured back into Fire Nation waters. Oh, wait; you *did* do that, didn't you? And it wasn't for me."

"Yes, it was," Zuko said simply. Trying to read the tension in cold golden eyes, in the stance that could whip from young noble lady to lethal in a heartbeat. "I wanted to protect you from the greatest threat to the Fire Nation, and the world." He drew a breath. "That's why I have to stop you."

Azula stared at him, false concern darkening into cold-blooded hate. "You're defying me."

I know.

"You're defying Father!"

I know.

"Traitor," Azula breathed, eyes alight with poisonous joy.

...I know.

Azula laughed. Loud and rich and-

Spun crackling arcs of blue, crashing together in a bolt that reached out and struck-

He was blind. There was just a wave of power; crashing through his chi, drumming in his ears, shoving him across open ground like holding back a hurricane with his bare hands. He held the pattern, breathed the pattern, praying everything he'd learned about lightning was enough to keep his chi intact. Praying Uncle was right, and you only needed a trace of energy moving to guide the lightning away...

In, down, up - oh, damn.

If he lived to do this again, he'd have to remember to pick a target *first*.

Agni, please let me not kill anyone.

He let go.

Lightning crashed, and he savored the utter, absolute *shock* on his sister's face. Before she faded, and everything faded, and earth dragged him down.

As the sun went out, he could have sworn he heard a breath of fire.

Agni, let him live, Iroh prayed, swatting aside the last few dazed Dai Li between himself and that too-still form. *It has been two years since I last lectured him for something so lethally foolish. And that has obviously been far too long.*

Though from a purely tactical perspective, his nephew had been working with limited options. Azula, the Dai Li, and the Avatar all in the same place - that was a recipe for disaster. And not only for the Earth Kingdom.

The general in him recognized that. The uncle and adoptive father...

Six years, it has been, since last I tore a strip off a junior officer. I believe I am looking forward to this.

Dark humor, to distract himself from how very still Zuko was. Still, and pale; breath shallow, pulse fluttering like moon-moth wings when Iroh felt it.

And he was cold. Cold as shock, for ordinary souls; far, far too cold for a firebender.

Zuko. No.

Rubble stirred, and Agent Quan coughed, looking around in dazed shock. Beyond him, Iroh saw Azula wince, fumbling hand touching what was going to be a most unpleasant lump.

Not dead. Iroh sighed. Almost tempted to smile, however bittersweet. *So Lee is born of Water, after all.*

Lee might be, but he was not. "I suggest you move, Agent Quan," Iroh said levelly. "I only seek to deal one death today." *Forgive me, Ursa. I must.*

The Dai Li paled, but held firm. "She is Long Feng's ally," Quan said hoarsely. "I'm sorry, General. No."

Iroh inclined his head in deep respect. "I pray Long Feng knows how deeply he is honored, to have such loyal men." He breathed in-

Earth collapsed under him.

Iroh gripped tightly to Zuko as a sideways landslide dragged them through the darkness. He kept himself from panicking, breathing slow and even. If the earthbender decided to trap them underground, his own breath might be the only air they had...

Earth lifted them back into sunlight, inside a raised wall of trembling stone Toph held with outstretched hands. "Got you!" she crowed.

"You've got to be kidding!" Katara sputtered, cradling a small form on Appa's back.

"Believe me, she's not kidding," Sokka griped, helping Iroh manhandle Zuko up onto cream and brown fur. "We can drop them off later, okay? Toph, come on!"

Grinning, Toph bounced herself up on a pillar of stone, and swarmed across fur to nestle beside his nephew. "Yip yip!"

"Ack!" Sokka clung for dear life as the bison took off, not *quite* in position on the massive neck. "Toph!"

"You snooze, you lose, Snoozles!" Toph's smirk faded as she gripped Zuko's hand. "He's cold. He's not supposed to be..."

"He redirected lightning," Iroh said quietly as they flew past startled guards on the Outer Wall. Taking off his own outer robe, he wrapped it around the singed prince. "Stay with him. Help me keep him warm." He looked up, about to ask how Aang was; lethal as Azula's strikes usually were, he did not think one of the Water Tribe would carry away a corpse...

He is not breathing.

Katara bit her lip, and unstoppered a vial. Glowing blue water circled above her hand, before sinking into the Avatar's wounds.

Spirit water. Iroh didn't dare to move. Aang needed more than healing, and there was no other chance-

The airbender coughed, and blinked at Katara. Smiled faintly, before sagging back into unconsciousness in her arms.

Thank you, Yue, Iroh prayed, sincerely grateful. *Thank you, brave lady.*

It had been a desperate gambit, indeed. But somehow, his nephew had *won*.

And now it is my turn to fight, Iroh knew, summoning healing flame. Sinking heat into chill flesh, and a tattered spirit. *Hold on, nephew. Hold on.*

There wasn't much fuel on a bison's back. As they soared through the day into afternoon, Iroh drew small bits of flame from coal shards in Zuko's firepot, knowing from his own experience his nephew needed a steady fire far more than an intense one. Still. It wasn't *enough*. "I would not object to our being set down, somewhere," Iroh said mildly. *Anywhere, so long as there is shelter, and something I can burn.*

"How about we just throw you off?" Katara snarled, pulling water from her waterskin to try and heal more of Aang's burns. But water wavered around her hands, and the glow of healing was faint.

"The cold-blooded fire rages through the body's chi like an inferno," Iroh said soberly. "It is not easily healed. You have fought quite a battle. A healer must know when to rest, or risk harming her patient further."

"I would *never* hurt Aang!" She glared at them both, obviously weighing the merits of smacking them off the bison's back with a whip of water. "Sokka, take Appa down so we can-"

"They're not leaving."

Toph gripped fur and his nephew, equally tightly. "They helped us out, we help them out, right? Like the ghost town-"

"No. This is different." Still holding the reins, Sokka turned toward them, face grim. "This time? You've got something we need."

Ah. Unfortunate, that. "I have only the very basics of fire-healing," Iroh said plainly. "I can mend bruises, little more. I will be no help to you."

"But you know lightning." Blue eyes held his, determined. "You said you wanted to bring balance back? Aang needs everything you can tell us."

Intelligent young man. Which narrowed his options for getting Zuko away from the Avatar considerably.

"Guys," Toph started.

"I can heal him, Sokka," Katara said, voice hard. "We don't need their help."

"Guys-"

"Katara. I believe you. I do. But I never even *saw* lightning until we got to Kyoshi Island! You think Yugoda ever did?" Sokka shook his head. "I'm not risking Aang's life when we've got someone who knows it *right here*."

"Hey! Idiots!" Toph yelled. "Either you let them off, or I try bending earth I can't see to *make* us land." She took a deep breath, and swallowed. "Zuko's *cold*."

Katara snorted. "Oh, please, like the firebender's going to catch a-"

"My nephew is ill," Iroh said bluntly. "Very ill. Please. Set us down."

"He's what? He was fine just..." Sokka narrowed his eyes, looking them over. "You're keeping him warm."

Truth had worked with Toph. Not with Katara... but her brother seemed a bit more willing to listen, rather than judge. "It is the only chance he has," Iroh said soberly.

"Uncle?" For once, Toph's voice didn't sound strong. "You sound like Sparky's going to..."

"He has a chance," Iroh said quietly. "But I need wood. Coal. Something that will burn."

"I thought fire was the superior element," Katara sniped. "Because you don't *need* anything but yourself."

"To heal, we do," Iroh said simply. "Just as water draws from you to heal, so fire draws from us. There is not enough chi to both create the fire *and* heal with it."

"Fine." Sokka turned back to steer Appa again, toward a sky-piercing forest, and raised his boomerang. "Get ready to catch."

Green pine branches were not the best of fuel, but they would do. He could keep Zuko warm, keep him alive...

Yet now they were over the waters of Chameleon Bay, and there was no reasonable chance of escape-

Coal smoke. He could taste it.

"I don't believe it!" Sokka's yell made the words a curse, as he stared down at the supply ship steaming through salt water. "How'd they get around the stink 'n sinks?"

By paying attention, Iroh thought dryly, peering at the crew suddenly animated on the deck below. The distance was great, but there was something familiar about-

A familiar gray head turned up toward them, spyglass in hand. *Not* panicked, despite what must be widespread knowledge that the sky bison meant the Avatar's presence.

Not panicked... but trebuchets were being brought on line, and the ship itself was being trimmed to flee.

Standing on a furry back, Iroh set the sky ablaze with fire.

Chapter End Notes

And this should be the last major intersection with canon. (Slumps with relief.)

Okay, a few canon notes: Most of "The Guru" episode did happen. Aang did get to the Eastern Air Temple to see Guru Pathik and try to master the Avatar State by unlocking his chakras; that's where he had the vision of Katara. And Toph was captured in Ba Sing Se by bounty hunters paid off by her overprotective parents: her official earthbending teacher Master Yu, and the Earth Rumble tournament host Xin Fu. Only too bad for them, she is the greatest earthbender in the world, invented metalbending, and turned the tables something fierce. (Aang and Sokka caught up with her on her way back to the city. She figured out something had gone badly wrong at the palace.)

By the way, people have wondered about Toph bending iron versus steel. The fact is, steel is not purified iron. Steel is, mostly, an iron-carbon alloy which may have traces of other elements, depending what you made it for. Sword steels can have some very interesting stuff in them. So the Fire Nation wouldn't use steel instead of iron because of earthbenders; remember, Toph is the only one we've seen bend metal of any kind. They'd use steel for the same reason anyone does - it's got properties of strength and flexibility regular iron just doesn't have.

And at one point someone wondered about Zuko bending blood, due to it being hot. Um... no. Firebending hot as in near-boiling water, sure. Lurid literature aside, nobody's blood ever actually boils.

Now, a note on why Zuko never just went, "Dear Fire Lord Ozai. Hate you. Hate your quest. Joining the Avatar."

Children see dolls as mini-people. Firebender or not, Azula setting an unwanted doll on fire is not normal behavior. Put that together with her canon tendency to torment animals and her flawless ability to lie without changing pulse or respiration... Azula is a psychopath.

Given Ozai not only accepts but encourages her behavior, and that last plot of his against the Earth Kingdom, he likely is too.

Canon, Iroh was at least in his twenties when Ozai was born, and off serving Azulon

in the war. It's likely he simply wouldn't have been home often enough or long enough to realize there was something drastically wrong with his younger brother. Not until it was too late. Psychopaths are charming... and masters of bending other people's reality.

Which, unfortunately, explains a lot about Zuko.

Anyone so massively screwed by Fate as to be in a relationship with a psychopath - much less raised by one - will come away with two things: a bent moral compass, and a severely damaged ability to test reality. Both of which, ironically, are in part caused by an accurate perception of the psychopath: *this person holds my life in his hands, and does not care.*

Right, wrong, every fact and supposition that make up reality - for the survivor, all are first tested against, will this keep me alive?

All too often, if it doesn't agree with what the psychopath wants, the answer is no.

Zuko chasing the Avatar for three years, canon, isn't surprising. Zuko realizing he could stop - that took a bone-deep courage, and at least as much guts as Suki facing off with Azula to cover Appa's escape. And as acts of pure, unadulterated bravery go, for me, that one puts Suki up with Yuya Shiina facing down Demon Eyes Kyo, or Vice-Captain Renji Abarai trying to take out Captain Byakuya Kuchiki to stop Rukia's execution.

As for Katara's behavior... she is not going to change her mind, not without confirmation from her own culture that changing her mind does not mean she is going insane. Anything else would be counter-survival.

Chaper 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Standing on the observation deck of the supply ship *Suzuran*, Captain Jee lowered his spyglass. Fiery script had faded from the air, yet it still burned in his mind.

Truce. Injured firebenders. Children.

No doubt in his mind who had blazoned it on the sky. Really, what other firebender would be on a sky bison?

General Iroh.

Traitor Iroh, officially. Which meant his orders were clear, as they were for any member of the armed forces. Traitors must be brought to justice. Either by Agni's hand, or another's. And yet...

Children.

"Captain!" Lieutenant Sadao gave a fidgety salute. "Coal-balls are hot! Ready to fire!"

The telescope snicked together in Jee's hand. "Douse it, and secure the trebuchets."

"Sir?"

"Follow the bison," Jee ordered the young lieutenant. "No offensive moves."

The lieutenant's face fell, and he swallowed hard. "Yes, sir." Shoulders slumped, he headed off to give the order. "Oh spirits, we're all gonna *die*..."

Jee managed not to bury his face in his hands. Misfits and screw-ups, his whole crew. That hadn't changed, promotion or no promotion.

Crew and captain, a critical part of his mind pointed out. *Don't forget that.*

True enough. He'd done more than his share of grumbling, following Prince Zuko's orders. But the truth was, he'd never have been on the prince's ship in the first place if he'd had enough sense to keep his mouth shut around... higher-ranking officers.

I thought he was a reckless fool, risking all our lives to pursue one airbending child. Jee shook his head, remembering the moon gone dark, and a glowing *thing* that had smashed its way through the invasion fleet. Thank Agni they'd been near the fringe of the assault; full steam had powered their flight, while some of the crew who'd played Pai Sho with the general had dropped to their knees and prayed to the Moon to rein in her enraged lover...

Reckless, yes, Jee thought, recalling the angry young prince. *But he wasn't a fool.*

Reckless, and dead, as the flaming wreck of his ship had made clear. *His* ship, and never mind the *Wani* was Prince Zuko's; Jee had captained her for months, and seeing her broken had struck him to the heart as much as the prince's death. They hadn't deserved it, either of them. Ship and prince had survived everything the world could throw at them, only to die at the hands of honorless wharf weevil-rats...

And Zhao hadn't even ordered a cursory search for the perpetrators. The Fire Lord's invasion came first.

How obedient of him. Jee smirked darkly. *Why, a suspicious man might even wonder if he didn't want them to be found.*

Well. Speaking of suspicious people... Jee dropped down the ladder to the main deck, walking over to a lithe figure in armor standing out of the way of the trebuchet crews, gold eyes narrowed to watch a creature out of myth fly. "Lieutenant Teruko."

"Sir." The marine officer came to attention, granting him a brisk nod.

Jee hid a smile. At least Teruko was here because of her attitude. Not nerves, like poor Sadao. "I suspect we're going to need a shore party, wherever they come down. Preferably people who can keep a cool head under fire. And not fire first."

"Not firing first is almost against marine policy, sir." She didn't smile when she said it. But her gaze held concern, not objections. "You don't think the firebenders will be the only civilians?"

"I don't know," Jee said plainly. "But I suspect firing first would be... unwise." He nodded toward the bison. "That's General Iroh up there."

Her eyes widened. "He's been proclaimed a traitor, sir."

"For sabotaging the invasion. Yes, so I've heard," Jee said dryly. "Based on past experience, though, the Avatar alone could sabotage a dozen well-laid plans." He held up a hand before she could speak. "I believe the Dragon of the West has information on my commanding officer. Even if he did not - he may be a traitor, but he's never been a liar. Or a fool. If he's putting himself in a position where he knows we may capture him, then those children exist. And they need our help."

"Our *heavily armed* help," Teruko muttered under her breath, turning to carry out his order. And hesitated. "Sir. He's been a fugitive for months. Why would he have information on Admiral Kamijyo?"

"Ah. I should have said, my *former* commanding officer," Jee admitted. "Paperwork and bureaucracy; the Ocean didn't do us in, but between the scribes and the rice-counters... Some chains of command still haven't been straightened out." Which suited him just fine. It was good to have breathing space, in case you ran across an order you really didn't want to obey.

Teruko frowned, and braced herself. "The prince is dead, sir."

"I know," Jee said grimly. "I want to know by whose hand." *So I can hunt them to the ends of the earth.* "Take whatever precautions you feel necessary, Lieutenant. I am going ashore when they land."

Though it didn't seem as if the bison's riders were in any hurry to do that. Standing on the bridge, Jee felt another pang of loss for the nimble little *Wani* as *Suzuran* fell further behind. *Suzuran* was faster than some cruisers, but the *Wani* could have kept up, even if the beast was fresh. For a while.

"Sails!" came a lookout's cry.

Water Tribe. Jee opened his spyglass to see the beast hover near one of the wooden ships. It was too far to make out details besides flashes of blue and brown, but there seemed to be a great deal of arm-flailing going on.

Someone doesn't like what they're hearing. Jee took a deep breath, and judged everything he knew of General Iroh. Traitor or not. "Steady course. Reduce our speed; I don't want any collisions. Otherwise, follow the bison."

"Sir," Lieutenant Sadao protested, "this is the Water Tribe fleet! Chief Hakoda's men!"

"I'm aware of that, Lieutenant," Jee said levelly. "We will proceed. And we will not fire unless fired upon." He let his gaze sweep the bridge. "We've been offered a truce to assist children of our own nation. I do not intend to be the one who breaks it."

That straightened spines. Good.

The Avatar gave you hope, my prince. And you - you gave us purpose, beyond the knowledge of our failures. Because we saw you fail, over and over... but you never surrendered.

Jee had come aboard the *Wani* with a crew of failures and malcontents. He'd left it, on Admiral Zhao's orders, with a crew that was... well, still eccentric. But give them a job to do, and it would be done.

...Although he had needed to make more than one announcement about the proper naval traditions regarding firecrackers, squid ink, sparrowkeets, and portmasters' offices. Was it a bad sign that he'd started beginning with, *don't get caught*?

He'd half expected to lose that steel when his crew of thirty were swamped by the scores of newcomers needed for *Suzuran*. But they'd held, a breakwater against the storm, gentling new waves of angry and indifferent sailors and marines into something... well, more worthy of the Navy they served. Even Sadao had calmed down since he'd first come aboard. A little.

Though you couldn't tell that by the way the young man was fidgeting now. "Lieutenant," Jee said formally, "would you care to join me on the observation deck?"

"Ah... yes, sir."

Out in salt air again, Jee let himself sigh. "All right, Lieutenant. Spit it out."

"Sir, this could be a trap!" Sadao glanced behind them, as if he could see through the command tower's steel to where the messenger hawks were kept. "Shouldn't we wait for the rest of the fleet?"

So young. "Lieutenant," Jee said plainly, "springing traps is precisely why we're not with the rest of the fleet."

"...Sir?"

"They could use a cutter to search for the tangle-mines, but a cutter doesn't have a cruiser's draft," Jee said plainly. "Hakoda may not have waterbenders among his men, but he has excellent divers. We're here to mark clear channels for approach to Ba Sing Se, so future ships go untouched." He smiled wryly. "Apparently, my record indicates I have a knack for command in the midst of... unpleasant surprises."

"Sir." Sadao's voice was very quiet. "Are you saying we're expendable?"

"This is war, Lieutenant. We're all expendable." Jee regarded the young firebender seriously. "I can believe General Iroh might turn traitor to the Fire Lord. Loyalty between brothers is never certain, and from what I've heard, his feelings on the war... changed, after his son died. But I do not believe he would ever lure his own countrymen into a trap." He paused. "Though the Water Tribes might

have plans he hasn't guessed at."

"Yes, sir." Sadao looked relieved, if grimly aware of how fast they were closing on the wooden vessels. "Thank you. For explaining."

Jee smiled briefly. *So young. Agni, help me teach him enough to get older.* "Back to your station."

The lookouts were keeping their own watch. But Jee unfolded his telescope anyway, watching the activity on the two nearest blue-sailed ships. *If they want to start a fight, all they have to do is not move...*

They were moving. Grudgingly, sails angling to catch the wind and open a gap for the larger steel hull. Though the warriors on board did *not* look happy about it.

Let's see how this plays out.

The sun sank away. Jee tried not to tense, all too aware that every firebender could feel Agni's strength weaker within them. If the Water Tribe intended to attack...

Ahead, the bison was landing.

"Don't provoke anything," Jee ordered as the ship made anchor. "Don't allow yourselves to be provoked. This is a useful opportunity to gain intelligence on our enemies, and I don't want it cut short for anything less than legitimate self-defense."

"You said we're under truce, sir," Helmsman Tobito frowned.

"I know that, and you know that," Jee said wryly. "But I'm not sure the *Water Tribe* knows that."

That sparked laughter, from most. Lieutenant Teruko was all business. "The river steamer is ready, sir."

Jee nodded. "Lieutenant Sadao, you're in command." *And let's hope the ship is still in one piece when I get back.*

Which wasn't quite fair. Sadao wasn't that bad.

...Well, not anymore.

The water crossing was short. Jee kept half an ear on Teruko's quiet orders, detailing who would guard the steamer and who would go ashore. His gaze was fixed forward, on the small, tense crowd of blue-clad warriors awaiting them. *Where is he, where...*

A smaller, familiar figure in blue pushed to the front; the boy who traveled with the Avatar. Behind him was a somber-looking warrior with blue beads on his right side braids... and a smaller, stouter, gray-haired firebender, clad in a fine green robe of the Earth Kingdom.

He's lost weight.

Jee drew a quiet breath, and walked to the very end of the ramp, stopping just before damp sand. "It is my understanding that we are here under truce, to aid-" *don't say civilians, the Water Tribe doesn't recognize that status,* "-noncombatants."

The boy snorted. The beaded warrior gave him a look of mild paternal disapproval, then glanced back at Jee. "So I've been told," he said levelly. "Someone was a little less than clear on exactly how this is supposed to work. Or why we should trust any of you, after what happened at the North

Pole."

Jee felt his men bristle behind him, and kept his own temper with an effort. *Children. Remember the children.*

"They did not know of Zhao's plan," Iroh said gravely. "I did not know of it, until it was too late. He was a treacherous man, but not a fool. He knew I respected the spirits; he knew I might have been able to stop him." The old general shook his head. "He was bent on glory, and that madness nearly doomed us all."

"Are you kidding me?" the boy demanded, shooting an angry glance at Iroh. "Do you really expect us to believe Zhao tried to kill the *Moon Spirit*, and you *weren't* all in on it?"

"Admiral Zhao *what?*" Jee exclaimed, shocked. Hearing that same shock, in the rustles of armor behind him. Yet not - quite - disbelief. He shouldn't have believed it. No true sailor doubted that spirits existed, but - that a great spirit could be harmed by human hands? That Zhao would dare to even *think* of harming it in the first place?

The moon went dark. And the very ocean attacked us.

"You didn't know." The young man looked as if someone had slapped him. "But... that doesn't make *sense*, you were *attacking* us..."

"That is true," Iroh said plainly. "But enemies or not, Captain Jee and his people are sailors, just as you are. And no one who lives and dies by the sea's will, even in the Fire Nation, would attack the Moon." He held Jee's gaze in the deepening twilight-

And dropped to his knees. "I seek the shelter of dragons' wings."

Jee felt the blood drain from his face. *He can't be serious.* "General. No one uses that anymore. No one's used it for a *hundred years*."

"Over two hundred," Iroh admitted. "But it is still law. And old customs should be dusted off, from time to time, to reassure them they have not been forgotten."

"It's only still law because the Fire Lord doesn't need to ban it!" Jee exclaimed, too stunned to be exasperated. "Every clan has clear lines of loyalty, straight to the Dragon Throne! The only way *any* firebending child could claim shelter is if..." Words died on his lips.

The only way a child could claim shelter until his loyalties were sure... is if he broke the line to the Dragon Throne itself.

And only one firebender could have done that.

"He's alive?" Jee whispered. "How? I saw the ship... we saw the explosion!"

"Luck, and skill," Iroh said gravely. "Young Toph is minding the fire in our shelter. But we have all fought a great battle, and I am tired. I will need aid, if he is to have a chance." He paused. "And my nephew is not the only young one who needs help. If Sokka and Chief Hakoda's men will trust you to aid them."

Jee raised a brow, considering Iroh's words, Sokka's wary and hopeful look, Chief Hakoda's cautious readiness...

A firebending child considered family by the Southern Water Tribe. That makes no-

Swift as lightning, the answer hit him. The Avatar's bison was here, which meant the Avatar was here. And technically... "General?"

"Captain?" Iroh regarded him mildly.

"That's one of the most... *creative* interpretations of regulations I've heard since one of my old chief engineers got caught with a feather boa, a hog-monkey, and six dancing girls." Jee shook his head slowly, almost tempted to smile. *Here we go again.* "Shelter is granted."

"And what does that mean?" Hakoda gave him a measuring look.

"For you and your men? A truce." Jee glanced at Iroh as the man stood. "Where is the prince?"

"Don't answer that." Sokka jabbed a thumb at the general. "Does the truce hold for him?"

Smart. Jee frowned. "That's not your concern."

"Unfortunately, it is." Iroh gave him a sympathetic look. "Their friend was struck by a lightning bolt. And there are not many with experience treating such injuries."

Jee kept his face calm, even as his heart sped up. Legend said the Avatar was in touch with the spirits. Which implied the boy would *not* be struck by natural lightning. And if that were the case...

"So I am afraid Sokka has insisted my nephew and I remain." The general gave the Water Tribe boy a reassuring smile. "Do not worry. One does not cut even a storm-thrown tree, if it shelters a sapling."

"Poetry," Sokka groaned. "I thought we left that in Ba Sing Se."

"The general is correct, poetry or not," Jee said dryly. "He's the only clan the prince has to protect him. He's as safe as you are." He eyed the older firebender, relieved when the man started heading inland from the shore. "What were you doing in Ba Sing Se?" *How were you in Ba Sing Se?* he wanted to ask. Everyone knew the Dragon of the West could work miracles on the battlefield, but even he had needed a whole army last time.

"Hiding." Iroh walked briskly toward an odd, triangular shelter that seemed to have grown out of the sand itself. "Or we were. Until the Avatar crossed paths with certain very unpleasant people, and we were forced to intervene."

"Forced to?" Sokka sputtered. "Hey, we never asked for the jerkbender to show up!"

"Lieutenant," Jee sighed, not turning around.

"Yes, sir." Teruko's voice held just a hint of glee.

"Ow!"

More surprise than pain; Jee hid a smirk, wondering exactly how Teruko had managed to smack the boy in the back of the head. She had a positive gift for that.

"Hey!" And that was definitely surprise, not pain. "You're a girl!"

Oh no. Jee tried to suppress a wince, knowing *exactly* what had gotten Teruko dumped into his chain of command.

"I," Teruko said in a voice that surfaced from the faceplate like magma, "am not *a girl*. I am not

woman. I am not *missy*. I am not your little sweetheart who cuts up seal meat in the igloo kitchen, iceboy! I, am a *Fire Navy marine*."

With a temper that reminded Jee all too much of a certain banished prince. Although he rather doubted Prince Zuko had ever burned down a waterfront tavern on shore leave. "Lieutenant," he said firmly.

"Sir." Still angry, but with the grudging respect he'd won from her over the past months of service.

It'll do. Ducking, Jee followed Iroh into sand-walled shadow.

Hot in here. Jee drew in a smoke-touched breath, eyeing the sandstone hearth aglow with hot coals and heated rocks. Some of which moved, suddenly; lifted with a wave of a little girl's hand to nestle under blankets atop a sweating, black-haired young man.

Thinner. Hair. And restlessly limp, instead of standing proud and straight and *angry*. If it weren't for the scar, Jee doubted he would have recognized the boy.

My prince. What happened to you?

He could only hope the young man lived to tell him.

"Captain Jee, Lieutenant," Iroh said formally, "this is Lady Toph Bei Fong, the greatest earthbender I have ever had the fortune to meet. She has been a most honorable opponent, and trustworthy in a temporary alliance."

Jee's brows shot up, seeing the blind eyes, the shelter shaped from sand, the casual way she'd moved blistering hot stones. *An honorable enemy? We might have a chance to hold this truce after all.*

"Toph, this is Captain Jee, who was the lieutenant captaining my nephew's ship before the North Pole," Iroh went on. "And his marine Lieutenant...?"

Politely, she took off the faceplate. "Teruko, sir."

"Ooo, you're the one who got Sokka a good one." Toph grinned. "I've gotta try that." She straightened, more serious. "You left five guys out there. You sure none of them are gonna start anything?"

Teruko's jaw dropped. "How did you-?"

"Hey, *blind*. Not deaf." Toph touched the sandy wall, frowning. "But you better sit on that fire, hot stuff. Right now, Sugar Queen's fretting over Aang. I'd be fretting over there too, but I can't help *him*. And... nobody else here is going to..." She swallowed. "Anyway. You blow up like that around her, she'll fill you full of ice knives before you can yell *truce*. She *hates* firebenders. She hates the whole Fire Nation. Big time."

"Katara is the Avatar's waterbending teacher, and Sokka's sister," Iroh informed them, sitting down by the unconscious prince. "I do not know the whole of her story, though the fact that she is Chief Hakoda's daughter makes much clear... Apparently a firebender killed her mother. I would advise you avoid her, whenever possible." He lowered his voice. "How is he?"

"He keeps shivering." Toph stepped away from the wall, dropping down to feel the ground itself. "A-and a couple times, his pulse was all fluttery... Uncle, is Sparky going to...?"

Uncle? Jee thought, stunned. *What have you been up to, General?*

"We will do what we can," Iroh said soberly. "He has survived this long. If we can bring him to sunrise... do not give up hope." He rested a hand on the young girl's shoulder. "It would be good for Sokka, for you to visit him and Aang. He has risked a great deal, convincing his father to shelter two firebenders, and offer peace to more."

"He's risking it for Aang, not for Sparky." Toph touched the blankets again, and visibly screwed up her courage. "You need to talk to these guys in private?"

"That, too, would be helpful," Iroh admitted. "Thank you, Toph. Without your help, my nephew would be far closer to the edge."

"He took a hit from *Ty Lee* for me. I ought to owe him. A lot." She stood, face fierce. "But I don't. And you tell him that, Uncle. You tell him, friends don't owe each other."

Slowly, Iroh smiled. "You are welcome any time. Whether or not you choose to use the door."

Toph smirked. "Works for me."

Clapped her hands, and vanished into the sand.

"A very refreshing young lady," Iroh observed, hand on the prince's forehead. Withdrew it, and reached for the fire with both hands. "I suggest you watch closely. But do not attempt this yourselves, without a healer present. The flow of energy can be very dangerous to a firebender trained in the classic techniques."

"Classic techniques?" Jee frowned, and knew by Teruko's carefully blank face that she was just as puzzled. "There's only one firebending style."

"Officially, that is so. But it appears Lady Ursa knew of another." Smile wry, Iroh gathered up flame-

Light shifted, flickering red and yellow shimmering to a summer-dance of gold-flecked green, wrapping the general's hands like sunlight.

"General," Jee said uneasily, "what *is* that?"

"It is a cruel irony," Iroh said quietly. "The only firebender I know who has truly mastered this technique, is the one who needs its help the most." He cast a glance at them both. "This flame does not kill. It *heals*."

Jee felt his jaw drop, the utter impossibility reeling through his mind. And yet the general was moving, stroking emerald flame over sweating skin-

Even in his fever, the prince leaned into it, breathing less ragged.

Iroh worked on him a few moments more, then released the flames with a sigh. "I cannot heal deep injuries, not as my nephew can. And so I believe my best course is to reserve my strength, so I may aid him a little at a time, when he falters." His jaw tightened, fingers curling in quiet fists. "I pray I am making the right choice."

"Fire... that heals?" Eyes wide, Teruko took off her helmet; as any student would to a master whose wisdom they sought. "The prince can *heal*?"

"He is quite good at it." Iroh gave them a quiet, proud smile.

Teruko turned to her captain, eyes still wide and wondering. "Sir-"

"The Fire Nation needs this technique, desperately. Yes." Jee didn't take his eyes off the general. "But it's not that simple, is it?"

"No," Iroh allowed. "No, it is not." He held Jee's gaze. "You have already guessed whose loyalty my nephew has broken."

Jee nodded. *And what could have driven the prince to that, when even that Agni Kai and three years' fruitless search did not... Agni, I'm not sure I want to know.*

"He did so for our people," Iroh said levelly. "My nephew and I have seen... many things. The Ocean's acts at the North Pole are not unique. Other spirits have interfered with our world. In more subtle ways, but they may eventually be far more damaging." He paused, weighing his words. "I do not believe the Fire Nation will win this war. I believe, in the next few months, or years... we will lose. Badly. And that loss will unleash horror such as even the murder of the Air Nomads did not wreak upon our world."

"We won't lose," Teruko began hotly.

"Lieutenant. The general was one of our chief strategists for decades. I would like to hear his view of the situation. Accurate or not." Jee eyed Iroh. "So you've chosen to ally with the Avatar's forces?" Not the most honorable position, no. But understandable, for a clanless man desperate to protect his only allied kin.

"No!" Iroh slashed a hand across, heat shimmering. "The Avatar is surrounded by counsel that will turn him against our people. Toph may be able to persuade the boy to sense, but if we are here, Katara will stop at nothing to fill his ears with her hate of us. And the airbender listens to her, before all others. No. We will remain only until Prince Zuko is well enough to travel, and we have started Avatar Aang on the road to recovery." He smiled then, like a cat-owl about to pounce on an unwary meadow vole. "Once we are away... my nephew has a plan."

"A plan," Jee said doubtfully.

"I believe it is a very good plan," Iroh said judiciously. "Though there have been some complications I did not anticipate."

"Princess Azula?" Jee said dryly.

"She would be one of them, yes."

"Princess Azula?" Teruko almost yelped.

"There are a limited number of people who can bend lightning," Jee informed her. "Fire Lord Ozai has never left the Fire Nation, I doubt the general did it, Jeong Jeong was last reported half a continent away... and given what I do know about lightning, I can't imagine Prince Zuko is capable of it."

"No, he is not. Not yet." Iroh looked grim. "She struck the Avatar down, and then..." He touched black hair. "Twice she has struck at him. The first, months ago, I deflected. This one... he managed the form himself. How, I can barely imagine. Toph says Ty Lee had struck him only minutes before, and while I know my nephew has practiced to dodge chi-blocks..." His fists clenched. "This is the second time she has tried to slay him, before my very eyes. There will *not* be a third."

"Sir." Teruko was rigid. "The princess is the blood of Fire Lord Sozin, our great hero. She would never be so dishonorable as to attack the crown prince."

"Unless that was the will of the Fire Lord," Jee said heavily. Frightening, how fast the solid ground of duty could turn to lake ice underfoot. "He wasn't supposed to come back, was he?"

Slowly, Iroh shook his head. "I know I ask much."

"If he lives?" Jee let out a soft breath. "You ask everything."

"If he lives," Iroh agreed.

Jee bent his head, striving for calm. "Lieutenant Teruko. Would you be willing to assist the prince's uncle?"

Teruko blinked. "Of course, sir." She eyed the general. "Such a serious charge must be investigated. Even if it cannot be accepted from a... dubious source."

"Very wise," Iroh nodded. "I am glad to have your assistance." He lifted a brow. "And you, Captain?"

"I need to keep both sides from killing each other," Jee said dryly. "We've brought fuel. I'll see it comes to Lieutenant Teruko." He bowed his head. "Good luck."

Somehow, when Jee stepped outside the earthbender's shelter, he wasn't surprised to see Sokka and Chief Hakoda standing just out of threat range of the marines. "What's wrong with him?" Sokka said bluntly.

Tell a Water Tribe boy of broken loyalties? I don't think so. "It's not your concern," Jee said levelly.

"It is if it's catching!"

Jee blinked. "No," he said at last. "It's an... injury."

Sokka crossed his arms, obviously not buying it. "Aang got hit by Azula, and *he's* not freezing."

"How fortunate for him," Jee said dryly. Lifted his gaze to the chief's. "We've brought burn medications." It was the most common injury for young firebenders, after all. "May we transfer them to you, while we discuss terms?"

Considering him, and the shelter, and who knew what else... Hakoda nodded.

"This," Sokka said numbly, "has been one of the *weirdest* days of my life. And hanging around Aang? Trust me, that's saying something."

He paced the length of his father's tent in dim lantern-light, all too aware of Bato's tolerant smile. Aang was off in the healer's tent with Katara fussing over him. Toph was hanging around her to fidget and shape sand into anything Katara might need, like the solid, *dry* bed she'd already lifted under Aang's bedroll. And anchored out there in the night was a *Fire Navy ship*, with half a dozen of their marines guarding Iroh and Zuko. *Politely*.

Oh. And one of the faces behind a firebender's skull mask was a *girl*. Or, maybe more than one. How the heck would he know? He'd never looked. Girls didn't fight, anybody in the Southern Water Tribe knew that...

Except people on Kyoshi Island didn't know it. Mai and Ty Lee and Azula sure didn't. And Toph - oh boy, better not even go there.

Yep. Weirdest day. Ever.

"Second thoughts about talking me into it?" Hakoda stood out of the way of his frantic path, a concerned frown on his face.

"More like third and fourth," Sokka confessed. "I don't know, Dad. Iroh... well, he seems okay. Toph trusts him, and a lot of the time? She's right about people. But all I know about this Captain Jee guy is he used to be on Zuko's ship."

"Hmm." Hakoda considered that.

"But that's not the weird part!" Sokka protested.

"So what is the weird part?" Bato chuckled.

How do I say this without sounding crazy? Sokka thought desperately. Swallowed, and looked his dad in the eye. "I'm kind of... wondering if... maybe Zuko's not the real bad guy."

"The *Fire Nation* prince?" Bato said in disbelief.

Oh, I knew this was a bad idea...

"The same young man," Hakoda pointed out, "who apparently put his life on the line for Sokka and the others." He nodded at his son. "Tell me."

Sokka waved his hands. "Just - tell me something, first. I don't know about the Fire Nation, and maybe you do... If Zuko dies. And the Fire Lord dies. Who gets the job? Who's... chief?"

"That would be Princess Azula," Hakoda answered.

"And - that's it?" Sokka burst out. "No council of elders? No women thumping their husbands that the guy they're thinking of picking doesn't listen to his wife - or he does, and she doesn't know enough about the good gathering times, and babies, and everything? Just, bam, that's it?"

"Crazy, huh?" Bato shrugged.

"That's not the whole story," Hakoda said thoughtfully. "According to some of our Earth Kingdom allies, everyone was expecting Fire Lord Azulon to name Prince Iroh as the heir in his will. But Azulon specifically named Ozai. Something to do with Iroh's failure at Ba Sing Se, and not being the son who would lead the Fire Nation to further glory." He rolled his eyes. "Which apparently means burning more innocent villages down to the ground."

"So... Toph could be right." Sokka gulped. "Oh man, if she's right..."

"Right about what?" Hakoda raised interested eyebrows.

Sokka threw up his hands, about to spell out the whole last frustrating weeks-

Wait a second. Think about this. Get it right.

Sokka chewed on his lip, and finally sighed. "The first thing you've got to know about Zuko is, he doesn't give up. Ever."

"Firebenders are determined," Bato nodded.

"I'll see your determined, and raise you a guy who broke into the middle of the North Pole, at night, fought his way past Katara *on a full moon*, tied up the Avatar, hauled Aang off into a raging blizzard, found shelter in the middle of *nowhere*, and was still alive when we caught him," Sokka said impatiently. "Zuko *does not give up*. He doesn't quit. He doesn't get bored. For all I know, he doesn't even sleep. You can smack him with a boomerang. Freeze him in ice. Dump him in the ocean. Blast him into a wall hard enough to leave little Zuko-shaped dents! And Aang's *done* that. Lots of times. He. Doesn't. Stop." Sokka paused to breathe, waving his hands to indicate the sheer scope of Zuko's crazy unstoppableness. "But I *did* see him stop. Twice. The first time? He chased us into a storm that turned into what the old fisher guy called a typhoon, and I still don't know how he got out of that one. Never saw a storm like that before, hope I never see it again... He *didn't* follow us. This is the guy who always chases Aang, and he just kept his ship in the clear spot and watched us fly off."

"The eye, people call it," Hakoda informed him. "Storms like that apparently head for the Fire Nation every fall. Which is one reason they haven't taken the whole Earth Kingdom. Any supplies they might need from back in the Fire Nation can get... delayed." He frowned, serious. "We've been on the fringes of a few, these past two years. Even I wouldn't try to take a ship through one if I had any choice."

Okay. Anything that could stop Dad? Pretty serious weather. "The second time? Was... different." Sokka dragged up scary, half-asleep memories. "We hadn't seen him in months. Not since the North Pole. We brought him back off the ice... well, Aang asked us to, so we did. And somewhere between the Ocean Spirit smashing up the Fire Navy, and everything going quiet? He and Iroh-" Sokka shrugged. "Poof! Gone. Aang and Katara got trained, we headed back south, found Toph to train Aang in earthbending... and on the way, we ran into three really scary Fire Nation girls." He counted them off on his fingers. "Mai's this kind of sour-faced knife thrower; I didn't see her at the palace, which kind of makes me worried. Ty Lee, she's this giggly acrobat who hits you so you can't move. She can take people's bending away for hours; you can guess how much that scares Katara. She *was* in the palace, and that was a close one. And then, there's Azula." Sokka whistled. "You know, if Toph didn't swear they were family, I couldn't see it? Not looks. It's... something else. Zuko's got a temper. Blows up at the drop of a boomerang. Azula? Ice-cold. When she's setting stuff on *fire*."

Hakoda nodded, thoughtful. "So you were in the Earth Kingdom?"

"And the three crazy ladies were following us," Sokka agreed. "Turns out they were following Appa's fur... anyway. Stuff happened, and the next thing I know? There's *six* of us backing Azula into a corner. Me, Aang, Toph, Katara - and *Zuko and Iroh*."

"They what?" Bato exclaimed. "Why?"

"Didn't know, didn't care," Sokka admitted. "We thought we had her... then she blasted Iroh and vanished. And - it was bad. I saw people hurt like that at the North Pole, and without a good healer, they would've..." He swallowed. "Then Zuko's pulling this crazy thing with fire, and Katara's helping him with water, and... Iroh made it. And then? Zuko says he *owes* Katara, and goes on to tell us all the nasty details of how his crazy sister is going to hunt us down and hurt us to get to Aang. Figure that out."

Hakoda's brows climbed toward his hair. "He *gave* you tactical information on your enemy?"

Sokka's jaw dropped. "He - what - wait..."

"That's what it sounds like," Hakoda said seriously.

"You mean Iroh was right? He was trying to help? Because seriously, you couldn't tell that from the yelling, and the fire..." Words died in Sokka's throat.

"Son?" Hakoda asked, as the silence stretched.

"...Idiot." Sokka smacked himself in the forehead, remembering a nightless day and shattering ice. "I'm an *idiot*. Zuko's a *bender*."

"We'd noticed," Bato said wryly. "Fire Prince - and in the Fire Nation, firebenders have the power."

"No, no, you don't get it!" Sokka sketched some of Katara's sweeping moves. "Things *happen* when benders get mad. Katara shreds icebergs. Toph slides rock sideways. Aang blasts roofs off! And Zuko's a *firebender*." He reached back to memories of a dusty street, flames flaring... and dying, with Iroh's warning words. "He didn't want to kill Aang. He wanted to *strangle* him!"

Bato gave him a wry look. "You sound like there's a difference."

"You've never been on the pointy end of one of Aang's 'every life is precious, enlightened people don't eat meat' speeches," Sokka said practically. "Trust me. You'd want to strangle him too." He pictured the street again, and barely kept himself from another smack. "Man! I should have taken them with us."

"Fire Nation?" Bato sputtered.

"They were worn out, they were hungry - I swear, Zuko looked like a zebra seal after a late breakup," Sokka shrugged. "Iroh said they were fugitives. Dressed like Earth Kingdom peasants, Zuko even cut off that stupid ponytail... Toph told us later the only thing that kept Zuko from falling over was he just *wouldn't* let us see it. And Iroh helped us before. Took down five of Zhao's firebenders like *that*. Damn it, I should have hit the jerk on the head and kidnapped them, or something..."

"He cut his hair?" Hakoda said carefully. "We've run into a few Fire Nation traders," he explained at Sokka's look. "That topknot's some kind of... mark of a warrior's pride. Something bad must have happened."

"Iroh's a traitor for helping us out?" Sokka offered.

"I suppose that'd do," Bato said wryly.

Hakoda nodded. "You were saying this was the second time Zuko stopped chasing you?"

"Yeah," Sokka agreed, putting that together with some of the other stunts Zuko had pulled. "It's like... he's willing to get *himself* killed. But not Iroh. And if you say Iroh's the guy who should have been Fire Lord..." He checked everything he remembered again, and let out a slow breath. "I know it's crazy, but from what Toph said? What I saw Zuko do to get us out of there? He's trying to *protect* the Fire Nation." Sokka eyed his dad. "Okay... why don't you look surprised?"

"We've had a few *discussions* with firebenders," Hakoda said frankly. "Friendly or otherwise. Zuko's hunt for the Avatar's no secret. If he doesn't carry out the Fire Lord's will, he's banished forever."

"Which is as good as dead, and Azula gets the throne," Sokka realized.

"Yes," Hakoda said thoughtfully, "and even though the Fire Nation doesn't talk to outsiders, I have a feeling not everyone looks forward to that."

"So they're not all idiots," Sokka snorted. "Zuko wouldn't shoot Aang with lightning. Aang likes everybody, and Zuko knows we hate him. He doesn't want a *Water Tribe* Avatar coming after them." *Wait. Something important in there.*

"We'll double the men watching over the Avatar," Bato said quietly to Hakoda. "Katara's right; we can't afford to allow the firebenders near him."

There. That's it. "We're going to have to, if we have to sit on my sister to do it," Sokka said seriously. "Iroh's a powerful bender, but when it comes to healing? He says he's barely gotten started. Zuko's the one who figured it out. In Ba Sing Se? Katara says Iroh was working in a teashop. Zuko's the one who trained with a healer. For *weeks*." He winced. "I don't know what Katara said about the North Pole, but she only learned from Yugoda a few days. The rest of the time, she was with Master Pakku. And he may be a master waterbender, but I never saw him heal anybody." He gulped, and stood his ground. "I know Katara hates Zuko. I know she'd like to dump him in the middle of Chameleon Bay in the middle of his own iceberg. Though I'm not sure that'd stop him... I *know* it's crazy. But Zuko wants Aang *alive*." He spread his hands. "I think he's Aang's best chance."

"Your friend's best chance is dying," Bato pointed out. "I've seen that look on Captain Jee's face before."

"No." Sokka shook his head, determined. "Zuko chased us all the way from the South Pole to the North, and back. He is *not* going to die on us."

Hear that, Zuko? Don't die. Aang needs you.

...And if that wasn't proof the world was broken, Sokka didn't know what was.

"Let's go over this one more time." One hand gripping Bosco's lead as they walked through green-lit stone, Earth King Kuei rubbed his nose above where glasses probably pinched. "The Kyoshi Warriors were actually Fire Nation spies."

"Yes, your majesty," Agent Bon sighed. Took his stance, and blasted the tunnel they were in a bit farther.

"And not just any Fire Nation spies. One of them was actually Fire Princess Azula." Kuei gave him a narrow glance. "Who my trusted advisor, Long Feng, conspired with to overthrow my throne, take Ba Sing Se for the Fire Nation, and *kill the Avatar*."

"It seemed to make sense at the time, sir," Bon said apologetically. "At least, for most of the Dai Li."

"But you're not most?" Kuei stopped, weighing him with eyes that looked years older than they had this morning.

"No, sir," Bon said humbly. "I can't really explain why. Most of my fellow agents... when the princess spoke, they were enthralled. It was - I don't know. As if they finally felt our sacrifices had been recognized. Honored."

"Sacrifices?" Kuei frowned. "You serve the greatest city in the world. How is that a sacrifice?"

You don't know. You've used our lives for years, and you don't know. Heart aching, Bon prostrated himself before the Earth King. "Your majesty. You are the center of spiritual power in Ba Sing Se. Through your right conduct and actions, you purify that power, holding off the evils of the spirit world. Koh the Face-Stealer is a great darkness, yet he is but one of those spirits who would seek to destroy our city. If he could." Still on his knees, Bon lowered himself again. "Yet for all your efforts, there are many, many people in Ba Sing Se. It became clear centuries ago that the Earth King alone could not ensure our people's safety. And so Avatar Kyoshi created us, to hunt small evils created by malice and bitterness, before they could offer entry to greater darkness. She asked the first of us, and we in turn have asked each of our recruits, to give up normal lives. And we do, as we always have. And now, despite our efforts, because of the orders we have carried out for our leader, our own people hate us. It... hurts."

"Orders such as brainwashing innocent civilians." Kuei's voice was unusually hard.

"We had to maintain the peace," Bon said quietly. *No excuses. This is your king.* "The war presses closer and closer; the malice of the spirits grows ever stronger. We fought as we knew how, and as we were ordered." He swallowed. "We always thought you knew."

"I didn't!" Kuei flung up his hands. "Why doesn't anyone tell me these things?"

"Because that was Long Feng's job?" Bon muttered.

Kuei looked away for a moment. Glanced back, and stepped closer, frowning. "What do you mean, normal lives?"

Bon winced. "We are touched by the spirits, your majesty. All of us are."

"Of course," Kuei said, puzzled. "You're earthbenders."

"This is different." Bon sighed. "We fight spirits, your majesty. We pit our bending and iron and will against creatures not born of flesh. It changes you." He looked up. "We touch spirits, and they can touch us. Far more than ordinary mortals. We... people *notice*. They don't know why, but they know we're... not right. Not *safe*. Even when we're out of uniform. Even when they have no idea *what* we do." He glanced down, sad. "Many of us never have a chance to marry, to grow old with our children. When any woman you court can feel you're dangerous..." He sighed again.

"Sometimes we're lucky. Those who survive spirit attacks can find themselves just as fey as we are. You'd be amazed how eager proper heads of households are to rid themselves of a spirit-touched daughter."

"Are you telling me the Dai Li followed the princess of a nation we're at war with because you're all *lonely*?" Kuei sputtered.

"No, your majesty." Bon stood. "I'm saying that when Long Feng put us under the princess' command, and she said our own people feared us, and intended to kill us all - *we believed her*."

"I *never* would have allowed-"

"Sir, with all due respect!" Bon broke in angrily. "You'd just ordered us to arrest our own leader! You were planning to strip massive forces from Ba Sing Se - we're under *siege*, in case you hadn't noticed! - to launch an attack half a world away! And all of this on the word of a twelve-year-old boy!" He took a breath, fighting for calm. "How could any of us know what you *wouldn't* allow?"

"That twelve-year-old boy is the Avatar," Kuei reproved him.

"The very dead Avatar, from the messages I've overheard in the stone," Bon said pointedly. "Unless

you think he somehow managed to survive a lightning strike." He dropped his head, regretting the pain on his king's face. "I'm sorry, your majesty. Whatever you intended to do to the Dai Li, we were meant to serve you and Ba Sing Se." He swallowed. "We failed."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that yet," a familiar voice stated, amused.

Hope surged - but Bon took a ready stance anyway, as a thin layer of rock crumbled into their tunnel. He'd failed the king once. Never again. "Shirong!"

The older agent gave him a wry smile, and bowed to their king. "Your majesty. It's good to see you in one piece." He turned back to Bon. "So, are you stumbling this way by accident, or...?"

"Agent Quan asked me to take his majesty somewhere safe," Bon said, faint with relief. Shirong had been Dai Li almost a decade longer than he had; if anyone knew where to find bolt-holes in the city, he would. "He also said, if I found you... Lee's plan will have all the help he can hide."

"But Lee's Fire Nation!" Kuei objected. "How *could* Amaya...?"

"The short version?" Shirong looked rueful. "Lee was a refugee, like many others. And Healer Amaya has a very kind heart."

"And what's the long version?" Kuei demanded.

"That, you should hear from the lady herself," Shirong said thoughtfully. "Briefly put? In some ways, Lee isn't like any other refugee." Green eyes narrowed. "And if he's managed to get himself killed before we pull this off, I am going to hunt him down in the spirit world and *strangle* him."

Bon stifled a snicker. "You really do like that kid."

"He'd make a good partner," Shirong mused. "We have a lot in common."

Bon tried not to start. One of the reasons Shirong was a recruiter instead of a regular agent was... well, partners tended to die on him. Not any fault of his, the most suspicious agent knew that; Shirong's spirit-wounds just ran too deep. He'd pretty much given up pair work with other Dai Li years ago, unwilling to risk inflicting his bad luck on any other soul.

Lee's teacher got grabbed by a haima-jiao right out of her own clinic, Bon remembered. *I guess Shirong's luck can't make his any worse.*

"A *Fire Nation* waterbender?" Kuei exclaimed in disbelief.

"Healer Amaya and Professor Tingzhe Wen can explain things better than I can," Shirong said plainly. "If you'd be willing to come this way, your majesty-" He cut himself off, closing his eyes to listen down the tunnel.

Bon frowned, reaching for rock-

"No. Some of the older agents might feel your chi, if you reach too far." Shirong frowned. "I need to get Mushi to explain how that trick of his works... You'll have to close the tunnel. I'm not up to much more than pebbles."

Ouch. Bon strode into stance, and sealed the opening behind them with a plug of stone. "And you came out here alone?" he murmured.

"Not quite." Shirong cleared his throat. "Madam Wen?"

A matronly woman stepped into view; Bon's practiced eyes picked up the subtle outlines of knives up her sleeves. "Your majesty," she bowed. "Will you honor my family with a meeting?"

"I'd love to," Kuei smiled.

He has no idea she's armed, Bon realized, as Bosco walked forward to sniff her curiously. *Why me?*

"Relax, Bon," Shirong murmured. "Lee left us a plan."

"I know what happened with his last plan!" Bon hissed back.

"Ah, but this one's better." Shirong almost grinned. "No man-eating water spirits."

No. Just one murderous lightning-bending princess. Bon sighed. *Remember your duty.*

He'd gotten the king this far. There was no way he'd give up now.

"What we have here," Captain Jee stated to the crew assembled in the main hold, "is an... interesting situation."

Oh spirits, we're all gonna die.

Sadao tried, very hard, not to fidget. And hoped he didn't look too obvious to his far more experienced superior officer. Jee was calm, correct, and poised; even though they were surrounded by enemy forces, with a known, powerful traitor on shore. *Anybody* would be biting their fingernails.

Hands down. Keep it together. Just breathe.

...Oh Agni, why couldn't I just have been a glassmaker?

Though actually, he knew why. A firebender with a constant case of nerves, working with the delicate glass meant for noble use? His family had tried their best, but Father and Grandfather really hadn't needed that third explosion to pack him off to the army. "If he *has* to blow things up," Grandfather had said sourly, "Agni, let him do it in the Earth Kingdom!"

...Well, he was *supposed* to have ended up in the army. But the paperwork had gotten tangled, and then he'd ended up on the wrong recruiter's boat, and then - well. Navy it was. Even if a firebender with a knack for blowing up things *nobody* thought would blow wasn't exactly the best fit for shipboard life.

At least he could swim. Which always came in handy, when the latest exasperated superior officer threw him overboard.

Only Captain Jee *hadn't* thrown him off the ship, yet. Only eyed him, at that first fireball with stray coal bits, and quizzed him up one side and down the other about when, where, and why his nerves caught things on fire when he *really* didn't mean to.

He hadn't had nearly as many stray sparks since. Which was really, really strange, given prior to this assignment the only time his nerves seemed to calm down was when someone was *shooting* at them. Combat, after all, was all about the worst thing that could happen, *happening*. Why worry then?

The captain cleared his throat. Sadao jerked back to strict attention, sweating.

"I'm certain you've all noticed that since coming aboard this vessel, your mail has been censored," Captain Jee said candidly. "More so than usual, that is."

Quiet chuckles whispered in the background, though everyone kept a straight face. You had to observe the proprieties. Even if the captain didn't mind.

"I believe I finally know why." Jee paused, and swept them all with a look. "Prince Zuko is alive."

He's what? Sadao barely heard the mass intake of breath. The prince was dead, assassinated by pirates; everyone had heard that before the invasion!

"Which means you can probably blame me for the holes in your mail," Jee went on. "When Admiral Zhao first *requested* that the *Wani's* crew abandon the prince for the invasion... well, I suppose I didn't refuse as politely as I should have." The captain's smile was wry. "I wouldn't slander the war hero who ordered us to join such a glorious venture. I'd certainly never suggest the man held the kind of grudge that gets *incurable, possibly traitorous troublemaker* lodged in your personal file." He paused. "Although anyone who was there one afternoon a few months back could tell you how *Commander Zhao* tried to strike Prince Zuko in the back... *after* the commander lost their Agni Kai."

The room seemed to freeze. Sadao swallowed dryly. That was - you just didn't *do* that!

Though he'd heard that did happen. Especially in units where people... got ahead, and didn't care much how.

Not something any of us has to worry about, Sadao knew. Jee hadn't commanded *Suzuran* long - but everyone knew. If you were here... well, you weren't criminal enough to wind up in prison, but no one really wanted you anywhere else.

But the captain wants us. It was the only thing that let him face the day, sometimes. Captain Jee didn't ask you to be perfect. Just to do the job, one way or another. As long as they could do that...

We're the screw-ups. But if we get something done, even if it's just running supplies - we haven't failed our country.

"Whatever the reason, we seem to be lacking critical information on the military status of certain individuals," Jee said bluntly. "I know Prince Zuko. He's young, impulsive, and as hot-tempered as any firebender I've ever met. But he has always tried to act in the interests of the Fire Nation. If he's traveling with the Dragon of the West, as it seems he is - I intend to wait until he can explain himself." Jee looked grim. "If he can. Iroh has asked for the shelter of dragons' wings."

Sadao blinked, and saw similar confusion on a host of faces. "Ah, sir? I don't think I've heard of that."

"Schools these days," Jee muttered. "It's old. But it is still legal." He swept the crew with a sober gaze. "Before all of the great names were unified under the Fire Lord, while we were still at war with ourselves, it was possible for a child to break loyalty and have no one left to protect him. Our custom was that an afflicted child, or surviving kin, could claim shelter - and remain unharmed, until the crisis passed." He smiled ruefully. "Don't think of it as simple compassion. Who shelters you from the storm is your ally, after all... and surviving children were usually quite loyal to those far-sighted enough to protect them."

Helmsman Tobito stepped forward. "Will the prince make it, sir?"

"Ordinarily, I'd say his chances were slim," Jee said plainly. "But apparently Prince Zuko, and his uncle, have uncovered... well. It sounds crazy, but - how many of you have seen *Love Amongst the Dragons*?"

Hands shot up across the hold.

Jee nodded. "Princess Ryouko's healing fire is *not* a myth."

Sadao's jaw dropped.

"Either the prince will survive, or he will not," Jee stated. "If he doesn't, the truce is over, and we will *acquire* the Dragon of the West. I don't expect that to be easy, but traitor or not, he is of the royal line, and I'll be damned if I let the *Water Tribes* execute him." He snorted. "That's *our* job."

...*Yup. All gonna die*, Sadao thought morosely.

"If Prince Zuko lives... things become complicated."

"Complicated?" Sadao sputtered. "Sir?" he added, belatedly.

"Apparently, the Avatar was injured in Ba Sing Se," Jee informed them. "How injured, we don't know. Which is why we are going to move *very carefully*." He shook his head. "It seems Chief Hakoda's fleet intends to hold both General Iroh and Prince Zuko until they can apply their own healing skills to the situation." He eyed his crew. "I don't approve of allowing our princes to be held hostage. It gives people *ideas*."

A low rumble from the crew; Jee quelled it with a slight lift of his hand. "At this time, Prince Zuko is too fragile to move. So we'll let the situation stand. *For now*." He smiled slightly. "But tomorrow, is another day."

Sadao gulped. "Sir," he managed. "We don't want to be the first to break a truce."

"We won't be." Jee's voice was iron. "The Water Tribe vessels are running light. They're *not* carrying heavy loads of supplies. Meaning the Earth Kingdom will be bringing them assistance soon. If the fleet hasn't sent them a message already, naming *exactly* who they've caught." He stood straight, fire glinting in gold eyes. "Once the Earth Kingdom learns the Dragon of the West and the Fire Lord's heir are there for the taking - this will no longer be an interesting situation. It will be a *rescue*." His voice dropped. "And Agni have mercy on anyone who gets in our way."

Normally she'd slam open a square door in rock, announcing to one and all that the Blind Bandit was in the house. This time? No way. Toph parted sandstone like a curtain, rippling it back together behind her before too much hot air could escape.

"Mini-sauna, huh?" She kept her voice down as she stepped over to Iroh and Zuko, aware of the firebenders asleep and on watch outside. Particularly aware of Teruko, a quietly snoring lump on the floor, resting up so she could spell Iroh later. "I think it's helping. His heart feels better."

"And the moon should rise soon." Iroh spoke just as softly. "Sunrise is what he truly needs... but I believe the moon may help."

Toph frowned and sat. "The moon? Why- oh. Because-"

"They do not know. Yet." The shift of Iroh's weight was a nod toward the other firebenders. "The

healing was a shock in itself. More... might be too much."

Ouch, yeah. Sparky hitting someone with a water whip probably would go over about as good as her dropping a tornado in the middle of Ba Sing Se. Only with more explosions. "Aang's hanging in there," Toph told him. "I think Sokka finally got Sugar Queen to 'fess up she needed sleep. She didn't want to, but their dad promised someone would keep watching Aang."

"Someone who is not you?" Iroh's tone was mild, but curious.

"I checked on him," Toph whispered, throat tight. She was going to be strong. She *was*. "He's breathing, his heart's okay... I can't *do* any more, Uncle. I'm the greatest earthbender in the world, and there's just..."

"Ah." Iroh reached out toward her. "You know, it has been a very frightening day. I could use a hug."

Oh. Well, if *he* needed one... Toph leaned into him, and only sniffled a little. He was strong and warm and *there*... And she didn't miss her parents and their stifling mansion and stupid guards and frilly dresses. She *didn't*.

Scrubbing her eyes, she poked Iroh in the arm. "I bet Zuko could use a hug, too. When we were getting Appa... He feels like Aang gets stuff handed to him, and he always gets kicked in the teeth."

"In a sense, he does," Iroh sighed. "We are of Sozin's line. And many of the spirits are very, *very* angry with us."

"Oh," Toph said in a very small voice. "Lots of hugs?"

Iroh chuckled. "A very good prescription, yes. I have been trying."

Toph sighed. Go figure. Zuko should have been born into *her* family; he got "rocklike" the way Aang got breathing. "You know, Aang doesn't always have it easy, either. Earthbending runs right into all that air in his head. He just... he doesn't know *how* to work. And maybe I'm not such a great teacher, 'cause it seems like I can't show him how. Or why. Or, I don't know, *something*."

"There is only so much any teacher can do if the student is not ready," Iroh said patiently. "Be a good example. Have him watch what you do, and try to explain why. Give it time."

"We don't have time." Toph shook her head. "If Aang doesn't beat Fire Lord Ozai by the end of summer, Roku says-" Belatedly, she shut her mouth.

She felt Iroh's regard shiver through the ground, before he sighed. "I would like to know what Avatar Roku said to you."

"Um..."

"I would *like* to," Iroh emphasized, "but I will not ask. You have kept secrets for my nephew. Honor demands that we not pry into those you keep for others." He stroked his beard. "If time is against you, I suggest that you ask supplies of Chief Hakoda - and Captain Jee, if your friends will allow that - and find someplace to... *focus* Aang's attention." He chuckled. "I would advise somewhere away from people. A place where there is only earth and sky and water, so he may hone his skills in the hearts of the elements themselves."

Toph nodded. "Is that what you did for Sparky?"

"In a way," Iroh said thoughtfully, reaching out to touch a restless shoulder. "We were forced to fall back on our own resources. In so doing, we had to learn what would *work*, not just what was expected. And so I finally realized that part of what I had tried to teach Zuko was wrong."

Toph frowned, sitting up. "But you're the Dragon of the West!"

"And a master of the inner fire. Yes," Iroh nodded. "But Zuko's skill lies not in the inner fire, but in flames outside himself. In a sense, his bending *is* more akin to that of a waterbender. Or to yours."

Huh. Kind of cool. And- Whoa. "So... if Aang's lousy at the fine stuff, but good at big and flashy?"

"I would say, go with it," Iroh agreed. Stilled. "Ah. Soon, now."

Toph scrunched up her face, feeling his anticipation in her toes. "You're a firebender. How do you know when the moon's coming up?"

"Practice," Iroh said simply. "Moonlight is the sun, reflected. It is too frail for most firebenders to draw strength from... but to those who *know*, Agni and La have ever been brother and sister." He *hmp*ed. "Most firebenders are born in daylight; children of Agni alone. Zuko... my nephew was born in the depths of night. I wonder how long the Moon has rested her hand on him-"

Coughing, Zuko sat up.

"Sparky!" Toph lunged.

A trembling arm caught her, allowing her to support him, even though she felt his confusion. "Who are you?"

She almost slugged him.

Iroh cleared his throat. "Some confusion is not uncommon, with this... illness. Nephew? Do you remember where we are?"

"...You're not Uncle Kuro." Chilled and worried, Zuko wasn't letting go. Even if he did feel weak as a boiled noodle. "Where's Shidan? I've got to go, it's important-" Coughs cut off his words; his arm slipped free, as he tried to hold himself upright.

"You are in no condition to go anywhere," Iroh said firmly, moving in to put a supporting arm around Zuko's shoulder. "Rest, and heal."

"But they're going to die!" Zuko tried to struggle, making no headway against Iroh's grip. "Let me go! When Shidan finds me - well, you better not be here when he does!"

Which didn't sound like Sparky at *all*. Toph grabbed for a flailing arm. *He's not fighting like Sparky, either. More like... a kid?* "What's wrong with him, Uncle? Who's Shidan?"

"Shidan of Byakko, I think," Iroh said, distracted. "Nephew. Nephew, please! We will send a messenger hawk. Who is in danger? Where?"

"A hawk won't get there in time. Shidan can! Please, let me go! I have to warn Gyatso!"

Gyatso? Toph thought, bewildered. *But that's-*

Iroh drew in a sharp breath. "Uncle... *Kuroyama*," he said softly. "Of Byakko."

Zuko stiffened for a glare; it was ruined by more coughing. "If you... know him? Then you know

who's going to be landing... looking for me. Let-

"Kuzon." There was a sad certainty in Iroh's voice. "You have done all you can. Rest now. Please."

"Kuzon?" Toph repeated, beyond confused. "But - he was Aang's friend-

Zuko gripped her sleeve. "You know Aang?" Desperate hope laced his voice. "Have you seen him?"

Okay, this was too weird. "Uncle?" Toph said warily.

"Wait," Iroh murmured, almost too low to hear. "We do know the young airbender," he went on, louder. "He is missing, then? He *is* a nomad."

"No; no, he left a note, the elders did something *stupid*, and he-" Zuko cut himself off. "We've flown everywhere he usually goes, we haven't seen Appa... but it's got to wait, you don't know what's going to happen, the hurricane that wiped out Joetsu last year, they're- It's crazy!"

"The Fire Sages blame the Air Nomads for the storm," Iroh said grimly. "And Fire Lord Sozin has not spoken against them."

Toph's jaw dropped. "They did *what*?" *Zuko thinks it's Fire Lord Sozin's reign? Why?*

"It happened some months before Aang disappeared." Iroh sighed. "Kuzon. Your uncle... left you in our care. You are ill, and... I do not think Shidan will be here, not for some time. The Air Nomads are great travelers, I am certain Gyatso has heard this ugly talk-

"It's not just talk anymore!" There was an awful catch in Zuko's voice; if she touched his cheek, Toph knew her fingers would be wet. "Please, the comet's coming. Someone has to warn them!"

"You learned of the attack." Quiet pain, in Iroh's voice, as he gathered Zuko close. "Kuzon. I am sorry. I am so sorry you came too late..."

"I - didn't." Zuko's voice was uncertain, hunting for memory. "We were *there*. Gyatso - he went to talk to Shidan alone. Well, not *talk*, but... Then he said, go. Aang - somebody he could trust, still out there, still-" He swallowed a sob. "I wanted to stay! I wanted to help..."

"You did help," Iroh said firmly. "You gave your word to Gyatso, and I know it was a comfort to him. You never stopped searching."

"But they're g-gone..."

"I know," Iroh said softly, easing that broken voice back to sleep. "I know. Rest now, Kuzon. You have done what you could. Now, the task falls to another."

Toph felt Zuko slip back into feverish tossing, and let out a breath she'd forgotten she was holding. "Uncle?" She stood up, the better to whisper over Zuko's head. "What the heck just happened?"

Iroh held his peace a moment, running flame over bare skin until Zuko sighed. Sat back, thoughtful. "I do not wish Aang to know of this."

"Zuko flipping out and thinking he's somebody from a hundred years ago?" Toph planted her fists on her hips in disbelief. "Yeah, Twinkletoes wouldn't like that. But if Zuko's really seeing stuff, maybe we need to bury some axes and get Sugar Queen in here."

"It is not a hallucination," Iroh said heavily. "His spirit is injured; his life, in danger. Under such

circumstances, a soul will dig deep to protect itself. Even beyond the strength it could claim from only this life."

Toph thumped onto the floor.

"You understand why I do not wish Aang to know."

Toph swallowed hard. "He's- but that's-"

"Kuzon of Byakko lived a long time," Iroh said levelly. "He promised to search for Aang, and he did, for over eighty years. But he did not survive Azulon's plots. He never saw his own great-grandson born." He let out a slow breath. "Kuzon's death, Zuko's birth... the timing fits."

"Timing?" Toph said in disbelief. "That's what you got?"

"I also have reason to believe Kuzon had a dragon-friend, named Shidan." Iroh's regard of her shimmered in even breaths, still muscles. "And I know, from what my grandfather, Fire Lord Sozin, said in his last years... the destruction of Joetsu did indeed rouse the Fire Nation to hate, and then to murder."

"But the Nomads wouldn't have sent a storm after anybody!" Toph protested. "I know Aang. He never would!"

"Aang is the only airbender either of us have ever known," Iroh pointed out. "We do not know how many of them were like him. And airbender or not, Aang is the Avatar. It is known, in the Fire Nation, that an Avatar can create a hurricane. Storm, and fire, and water - all bend to their will, when they feel the need."

Not just can, Toph realized, feeling the old, old anger vibrating through Iroh's bones. *Somebody* did. "When... when did it happen?"

"Long ago," Iroh said softly. "Before the time our children are taught of, now. Before the Fire Lord was anyone more than head of the Fire Sages, serving our people and the Avatar." He sighed, deliberately turning from that memory. "But I believe you are right. From what history I have found, and Sozin's own words, the hurricane that destroyed Joetsu was purely of nature's doing." He shook his head. "Yet human malice did cause the disaster. For there should have been a warning that such a storm was on the move, brought by monks visiting the Western Air Temple. And no warning reached the people of Joetsu."

"But you know the airbenders wouldn't have..." Toph trailed off, feeling Iroh's sad regard. "Uncle? Who - who would they have warned?"

"From what I have been able to discover, the Air Nomads of that time disliked dealing with my people," Iroh said levelly. "There were rare exceptions. Kuzon, for one; though it would seem he had his own flying friend to bring him to the temples. But Byakko is not near Joetsu. It is most likely word would have been brought to Fire Lord Sozin himself."

Toph swallowed, glad she was sitting down. "You think... the Fire Lord...?"

"My grandfather was a very driven man," Iroh said sadly. "To rid himself of the Avatar's interference in our nation's hearts, and remake the world as he wished? Yes. I believe he would sacrifice even his own people." He winced. "And if he allowed ours to die... how much more would he be willing to lie, to destroy Aang's?"

Toph shivered.

"But I have no proof," Iroh sighed. "Only what I have studied of a people a century murdered, and the words of a man now dead and ashes. A man our history paints as the greatest of heroes, an example for all time. I have nothing I could lay before our people, or even give to my nephew, who wanted so badly for his father to be worthy of his love." He paused. "Though he might listen, now."

"Yeah," Toph said wryly, "if he remembers what century it is in the morning." She shivered again. "If - if that's how the war really got started... that's scary."

"It frightens me, as well," Iroh nodded. "Yet it also gives me hope. For if what I believe is true, then - well, I do not know how to stop the war. But if Aang can stop it, I believe Zuko and I may help prevent it from starting again."

"Yeah?" Toph rested her hands on her knees, listening hard.

"I would prefer to keep certain details private, while we are among Chief Hakoda's men," Iroh said plainly. "But I think disaster has wracked us all, again and again, because people depended too much on the Avatar to teach them of other nations. And so too few of us knew each others' ways, to be able to turn aside wounded pride when insult was not truly intended." He paused. "Zuko has a plan that may allow some of Earth and Fire to build lives together. If it succeeds, then those most lethal of weapons, hate and distrust, may be finally broken."

Toph rolled those words around in her head. "Sounds kind of... long-term."

"The war did not start when Sozin attacked the Air Temples, and it will not end when Fire Lord Ozai is defeated," Iroh said gravely. "The true war started with lies, and hearts twisted by bitterness. And it will only end when those of us whose spirits have been wounded reach out to heal each other, and ourselves." He sighed. "As I hope my nephew is healing, even now."

Something about the way he'd said that... "Zuko isn't hurt the same way Aang is, is he?"

Iroh was silent.

"He's not," Toph stated, sure now. "Because you think Sparky could get better at dawn, and... Aang won't." She swallowed. "What's really wrong with him, Uncle?"

"It is... private," Iroh said at last. "We do not speak of it to those outside the Fire Nation. Even the Avatar might not be taught of it, were he not of our people." He paused. "I can tell you that it is Zuko's spirit that is injured, more than his body. But I will not say more. The reaction, from most of other nations, is... not well intentioned toward us."

She scowled at him. "*I'm* not most, Uncle."

"I know," Iroh nodded. "But if you knew, you might show that by how you react to Lieutenant Teruko, and the others. And it would be far more helpful to Aang if Captain Jee's men trust my nephew."

Toph frowned, poking that from all angles. "Okay." She held up a warning finger. "But you said the war got so bad because people didn't *get* other nations. So maybe you better think about that, too."

Iroh chuckled ruefully. "You are right. And I will. But not while we have spears and firebenders glaring at one another."

Point. And he hadn't asked her not to tell Aang there *was* a secret. Which she would. Later. About Sparky... and what Iroh thought had happened.

Toph yawned, trying to cover it. "He'll be... okay in the morning?"

"I will wake you if anything changes."

Which wasn't a yes, Toph knew, settling down in some of Iroh's spare blankets. But Uncle felt like hope.

It was enough.

"And now, Princess, comes the moment I double-cross you."

Azula blinked, trying to get blurry double images of a steel ceiling to coalesce into one. Steel above her. Steel cot under her. Steel walls to every side; one - *probably* one - with a door, and a barred window in it, and Long Feng's smirking face.

"Bend all you like," the Dai Li leader went on, almost genial. "There's nothing in there to burn besides you. And no one would be foolish enough to unleash lightning inside a *steel box*."

Trapped. As she'd intended to have Zuko trapped. How... annoying. "Is this how the Dai Li treat their allies?" Azula said silkily.

"Oh, please. We both know you dreamed of doing this to me first." He shook his head in mock sorrow. "You and the Avatar are surprisingly alike. Both revered. Both powerful. Both such lost little children, playing grownup games."

Azula hid her smirk. *You have no idea the kind of games I play. But you'll learn.*

"I wonder if the Fire Nation hates you just as much as they hate him."

Azula sat bolt upright, and regretted it. Not the sudden spike of nausea; whatever had happened after she'd struck down the Avatar, *something* had hit her hard. No; moving meant she'd reacted, which told Long Feng he'd found a weakness-

"Oh, don't think we don't receive intelligence reports, even in the heart of Ba Sing Se," Long Feng smirked at her. "You're quite the little monster, aren't you? Just the sort of creature Avatar Kyoshi meant to wipe out, centuries ago. Such a *shame* she had to kill so many innocents as well." He bent nearly to the grate. "Though you know the real shame is she didn't finish the job..."

"Please, you're boring me," Azula yawned. "My own brother knew I was a monster." *My own mother...* "If I didn't care what the crown prince of the Fire Nation thought, what on earth makes you think I'll care about you?" She narrowed her eyes, ignoring the stab of pain from her throbbing head. "You, who came from nothing; who was born with *nothing*. And so you fought and schemed and connived your way to power-" *like Zuko, my poor fool of a brother* "-but all of it still means *nothing*. True power, the divine right to rule, is something you're *born* with."

Long Feng's smile slipped away, and something darker than hate glittered in his eyes. "Your brother must have hit you harder than you think, Princess. You seem to have forgotten which side of the door you're on."

"Oh, I forget nothing." *Zuko? Little Zuzu managed to... someone will die for that.* "You don't *really* think I'll stay in here, do you? It's so *boring*."

"Get used to being bored," Long Feng said dryly, and motioned behind him. "Or you'll see what

the Earth Kingdom does to *your* allies."

A Dai Li's stone fist lifted a familiar braided head, and Ty Lee beamed at her. "Azula! There you are!"

No. Azula clenched her teeth on a hiss of rage. *No, she's mine, how dare you touch what's mine-!*

The green-clad girl *twisted*, feet lashing out to strike something that scraped fast as a mosquito-hawk through the slot under the door-

A lacquered wooden tray.

Gold eyes burning, Azula lunged. One foot slammed down to stand the tray on edge. The other pushed her off deadly metal, balancing on black wood for one critical instant-

Lightning blazed.

Strands of hair out of place, Azula stepped through the smoking doorway, gaze searching the blurred double-image of the corridor like a storm-dazed hawk. Door down; one very crispy body under it. A gray-faced Dai Li agent crumpled to one side, stone gloves in pieces around him, as if his bending could no longer-

Ty Lee wrapped arms around her in a vine-clingy hug. "You're okay! I was so worried."

Azula blinked, throbbing brain adding up how easily Ty Lee had turned the tables on two skilled earthbenders. "You... let them capture you?"

"Of course! It was the fastest way to find you." Grinning, the acrobat stepped back. "Oh, I know you didn't really *need* my help. But Mai warned me Long Feng would try something nasty, and you know how Mai worries. And I know you like it when she's just a *little* less gloomy. So! All done. Take the city! Your dad's going to be so proud."

"Yes," Azula said evenly. "He is." *One more loose end here.* "Agent... Quan, isn't it?"

Dark eyes looked up at her, rage and grief clear as daylight.

"Oh, don't look like that. I'm not going to kill you. Not yet." Azula smirked. "I should. You're not loyal to me, and I don't think you ever will be. Which is... interesting." She studied the man, reaching out with inner fire. "You have a killer instinct, pure as any firebender. You should feel my power, and bow before me. Yet you won't. Why is that?"

Quan stared back at her, swallowing grief. "I am loyal to the Earth King, and the city of Ba Sing Se."

Hmm. Only one lie in there. Interesting.

"Earth King's missing," Ty Lee whispered to her. "And the bear."

Azula smiled cruelly. "Your king is gone. Your city is in my hands. And the rest of your men are loyal to me. Why shouldn't I give you to the firebenders for target practice? Or worse... ship you out to a sea barge, until the lack of earth drives you mad?"

He twitched at that. Good.

But from somewhere Quan drew strength, and that was... not so good. "The Dai Li protect our city from the evils of the spirit world," the agent said hoarsely. "Do as you will with me. But if you

take us from our duties - even the might of your armies will not survive the cataclysm."

The spirit world? The man was as cracked as Uncle.

Still. He actually seemed to believe it. "Well," Azula mused, sharp nails tapping on her robe, "you might be thinking of betraying me... but you haven't actually done it." She glanced, deliberately, at lightning-seared flesh. "I'm sure you can give me... assurances of your good behavior." She shrugged, corridor whitening out for a moment with pain. "You have until we get back to tell me what they are."

Head high, she stalked down the corridor.

Ty Lee was a skip and a jump behind. "You sure you're okay?" the acrobat whispered. "That's an *awful* lump."

"Right now, there are two of you," Azula said honestly. Two Ty Lees... now, there was a frightening thought. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does!" Both Ty Lees had their stubborn look on. "We need to find somewhere you can sit down... ooo, the throne room! You can sit up there and give orders and look all regal and impressive, and I can scare all the servants into pampering you until you feel better!" The blurred acrobat cartwheeled, grinning.

Not half bad as a plan, at that. Especially given more details of the fight were filtering in; the waterbender she'd baited, the Avatar down, Zuzu a traitor-

Zuko is a traitor.

It thrilled through her; the sure knowledge of the choice her fool of a brother had finally made. And the consequences.

"Hey!" Ty Lee smiled. "You had a happy thought!"

"Yes," Azula purred, pain suddenly worth it. "A very happy thought."

The throne is mine. Now, and forever.

Chapter End Notes

A genealogy for Zuko, given people keep asking. Yes, this uses creative license and disagrees with canon in "The Avatar and the Firelord" ep. For real brain breakage, remember this is Azula's family tree as well.

Sozin & Wife - Azulon

- Ozai

Roku & Ta Min - Ilah

- Zuko

Unknown & Unknown- Shidan

- Ursa

Kuzon & Wife - Kotone

Wani - alligator. Suzuran - lily of the valley.

I know Aang doesn't lecture people about vegetarianism in the show. But he makes it pretty clear he disapproves of meat, furs, and a lot of other things you need to survive under arctic circumstances, where you can't grow vegetables. To Sokka, that probably feels just as bad.

From some of what was implied in "The Storm" and a few other eps, it seems likely Lt. Jee and most of the crew were new on board; that they'd only been there a few months or so. I've always thought being assigned to Zuko's ship had to be the punishment detail. Remember at one point Zuko accuses the helmsman of mutiny because the course changed without warning; what if that wasn't paranoia? What if a prior crew had mutinied, or threatened to? Ozai's the kind to make sure the gift of exile just keeps giving.

If you think about the episode "The Avatar and the Firelord", Sozin wouldn't have really been after the Air Nomads. He was after the Avatar; to seize and destroy him, or at least neutralize him, before he could become as powerful as Roku. So the question isn't, "Why did Sozin wipe out the Air Nomads?" It's, "what tools did Sozin have to kill the Avatar?" How could he ensure the Fire Nation would leave no stone unturned, no corner of the world not searched, to find that one Air Nomad child?

Hate.

Hate is not the opposite of love. It is its dark shadow, and it can move just as many mountains as that brightness. People have survived the most hopeless, impossible situations because they hated their captors and abusers, and refused to let them win.

Unfortunately for the Air Nomads, they were a very good target for Fire Nation hate. Detachment from worldly concerns works out okay, as long as you stay in temples on top of mountains. When you don't... remember how much Aang disrupted Katara's village life in the first two episodes? Oh, you're at war with the Fire Nation? Let's blow off the tasks the elders say are important and have fun! On top of that, let's break the village taboo and visit the Fire Navy ship, because you gotta conquer fear! Whee!

Now, take that attitude and dump it in the middle of a Fire Nation hurricane season. Warning - if I were you, I'd get behind a very big rock.

Ah, yes. That cavalcade of fireworks you just saw was all the great names exploding in incandescent fury at having their hurricane preparations disrupted, which directly impacts their honor by damaging their ability to protect their people. And the commoners exploding because the Air Nomads apparently have as much sense of the dignity of the upper class as your average hog-monkey (see Aang blowing up Long Feng's robes, among many, many other events), which implies the great names don't have the power to protect that dignity, which in turn implies the great names can't protect their people. And every Fire Nation citizen in general exploding because hey, this crazy Air Nomad says he's friends with us and with that other clan we really hate, and what kind of grinning sociopath is he...?

And if other Air Nomads were as quick to lie to "smooth things over" as Aang was with the warring Earth Kingdom villagers in "The Great Divide"... oh, boy. The Fire Nation keeps historical documents. One check of a scribe's records versus the words of friendly, cheerful people who are probably no longer there to suffer the fallout - they're nomads, after all...

Roku? Keeping the four nations separate, so they didn't know each other, when the Air

Nomads could apparently go anywhere they pleased? You were an idiot. Idiot.

Even so, even when a group is hated, it takes a lot to start a genocide. There is one common theme in real-life genocides: the perpetrators believe they are the victims. No matter how evil and all-powerful Sozin was, in order to make canon events match up with what we know from real life, certain things had to happen. Events had to work out such that the vast majority of the Fire Nation believed that 1) they'd been horribly betrayed, 2) the Air Nomads were responsible, and 3) unless they did something drastic, it would happen again.

Unfortunately for the Air Nomads... yes, Sozin could set that up.

In reference to Avatars, hurricanes and overkill - from the episode "Imprisoned", I quote Aang: "I wish I knew how to make a hurricane. The Warden would run away and we'd steal his keys!" Good, Aang. Good idea. And then there'd be no one to rescue, because the hurricane would have *killed them all*.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ow.

Lying in fire-lit dimness, Zuko blinked, trying to sort out who, what, where, and was there anything lethal currently pointing his way.

Warm in here. He breathed in air that shimmered, basking like a gliding lizard in glorious, wonderful heat. Warm; warm from the tips of his toes all the way to his core. The warmth of life, driving out even the memory of killing cold...

Azula. The Avatar. The lightning.

...I'm a traitor.

It hurt. Inside, where he'd never stopped hoping that his father would - that somehow-

He doesn't want me.

And I... I don't want to be the heir he wants. Not anymore.

It hurt. But it didn't feel like he would die from it. Which was its own hellish flavor of grief. He'd tried so hard to be the crown prince, the heir Fire Lord Ozai and their people needed...

But to serve our people, I can't serve my father. Zuko swallowed dryly. *I guess I have to live with that.*

Well. Looked like treason wasn't going to kill him. Time to figure out what else wanted a shot today.

Warily, Zuko opened his eyes.

Firebenders!

The armor was as unmistakable as the sense of flame flickering within them. Only two things kept him still. First, he wasn't bound; meaning either he was dealing with a commanding officer of Zhao's level of idiocy, or his disguise as Lee was holding. Second-

Well, you couldn't mistake Uncle's snores for anything else.

Moving slow and quiet, Zuko slipped out from under sweat-soaked blankets, not bothering to dress. Clothes could wait. He needed to *know*.

Uncle slept like a rock. A noisy, warm, completely unharmed rock.

The relief was so intense, he almost sat down on Toph.

She's okay!

No. He didn't know that. She wasn't injured, but she'd been trapped, and Long Feng had been behind it, and Katara hadn't known about it-

Toph. Forgive me.

Zuko swept his hands through steamy air, gathering just enough water to glove one hand before he laid it gently on her sleeping face. Reaching through the water as Amaya had taught him, searching for any sign of that unnatural, light-induced *smoothness* of a mindbent spirit...

Nothing. Just the rough, lumpy edges of pride, and gleeful stubbornness, and little cracks of fear she'd never give up to anyone so long as she could stand on her own two feet. Just - *Toph*.

Zuko lifted his hand away, ashamed to have pried. He'd just been so *afraid*...

I'll apologize. When she wakes up.

Hopefully, after he'd gotten cleaned up a little. Ugh.

Firebending marines, Zuko thought, looking over the armor and insignia of the two napping near the entrance. *Sandstone shelter on top of sand... Toph must have made this. And Uncle and I aren't chained up.*

Meaning the most likely scenario was that Uncle had used the "lost colonials" story again. Okay. He could work with that.

Marines, and the air tastes salty. Zuko closed his eyes and reached out, *feeling*. Yeah. Definitely a lot of water that way.

Time to find someplace for a bath.

Cover as a colonial didn't even begin to enter his calculations. The colonies were civilized, and civilized people were *clean*. Even at sea, every ship used its boilers to distill enough fresh water to scrub down with. Whatever story Uncle had come up with, they'd need respect to pull it off. Every little bit would help.

Zuko had to pause, gathering up his robes. Last he'd seen them, they had been a respectable set of green, hems neat even after he and Uncle had sewn them back up. Now, stray threads had flashed to ash, and a fine pattern of black scorches laced over each sleeve, like veins in a flutter-hornet's wing.

That was the lightning I didn't deflect. He swallowed dryly. *Agni. I almost died.*

He had to duck his head and breathe, until the shudders went away. Okay. He'd almost died. *Again*. It was Azula. What did he expect?

Why didn't I just kill her?

But he knew the answer even as he asked. Azula might be murderous and vicious and insane... but she was his *sister*.

Family. Community. Zuko smiled wryly. *I guess Lee is part of your tribe, Master Amaya. I just... can't.*

Which was oddly freeing. If he couldn't kill Azula, if he *knew* he couldn't-

Then I fight to stop her. And I don't hold back.

Lighthearted, he turned his attention back to the familiar task of sneaking past armed, alert firebenders. Which wasn't nearly as hard as their commanding officer probably wished it was.

Rotated watches or not, it was just before dawn, and every firebender was at a low ebb. A moment of glances elsewhere, and he was outside, and out of sight.

What the heck?

Years of experience fighting in the most bizarre situations let Zuko keep moving, even when what he was seeing was *impossible*. Water Tribe blue tents pitched above the high-tide line. A Fire Nation river steamer anchored in the shallows, armed sailors on watch. At least one Water Tribe ship pulled up on the shore, not too far away, with armed and obviously disgruntled Water Tribe warriors guarding it. A Fire Navy cruiser, likely the steamer's mothership, anchored offshore, with a watch standing guard at the rails, just as grumpily put out. And nobody was bleeding. Or on fire.

This? This is not good.

Either he was looking at mass treason - not damn likely - or a whole Water Tribe fleet had gone over to Ozai - even *less* likely - or...

The Avatar.

The Avatar, or spirits out to help their chosen child. Right now, he didn't care which. This was *bad*.

And he had an awful feeling it might be his fault.

Yāorén.

Uncle had managed to tell him a few things, that morning before he'd gone looking for Toph and the world had blown up in his face. Legends. Spirit-touched benders. People once meant to *help* the Avatar.

When cow-pigs fly. Zuko smoothed the snarl off his face as he ghosted down the beach away from the oddly mixed camp. *I warned him about Azula. I warned him about Ba Sing Se. I helped Toph get Appa back. And I faced down Azula and nearly got fried covering his skinny airbending butt. I. Have had.* Enough.

Steam was rising from the sand around his feet. Zuko sighed, and gathered it around his hands before any betraying wisps could escape. *I could really, really go for a tub right now...*

Stripping down, he streamed seawater into a ball, wringing it between his hands as Amaya had taught him to drop out salt and creatures too small to see. Drinkable fresh water sloshed around his fingers; he took a few grateful swallows, before moving on to getting clean. *Just like a ship-scrub. Move fast, be thorough, try not to think about anyone watching.*

At least it was hot, bubbling hotter as dawn broke and sunlight washed over him. Zuko buried his face in hot water for a long, bracing moment...

Sighed, let it flow down into sand, and dressed with the speed of midnight raids. He'd wrung most of the water out of his hair, but not all; a little dampness would go a long way toward answering questions on how he'd cleaned up. *Not like I can do anything with hair this short, anyway,* Zuko thought ruefully, forming a palm-sized ice-mirror to check. *Not that I know if I even should. I have no idea what Uncle's told them-*

Gold gleamed, and he almost dropped frail ice.

Breathe. Look again.

Not his imagination. Amaya's concealing blue... was gone.

Sozin's eyes.

So he'd been told, all his life. The pale, pure gold found only in a few great names' families; and never, never supposed to be gifted to one whose firebending would only be... mediocre.

Though one could be a great bender without it. Uncle didn't have it. *Azula* didn't have it.

It ached, to look in a mirror and see Ozai's blood.

It doesn't matter. I won't let it.

And at least now he *knew* the spirits were sticking their glowing fingers into this mess. Only another waterbender should have been able to move that thin layer of bent water. And Katara never would have done it.

I could put it back. Zuko grimaced. *But if Toph's here, and the Water Tribe's here... no. Better find out what's-*

He almost moved, before sand boxed him in. "Stay put!" a familiar voice demanded.

Zuko raised his brow, hearing the worry under the order. "Toph? Are you okay?"

"You're sane? Yes!" Sand splashed away as Toph slugged him in the arm. "Don't you ever scare me like that again, Sparky!"

"Ow." Zuko winced. "I hope I never do that again, either." He sighed, and mustered his courage. "Toph? I'm... sorry."

"You darn well *better* be." Toph rubbed at her nose. "You scared Uncle, you know that?"

"I know," Zuko admitted softly. "But that's not... I found the house where you were trapped. I thought it might have been the Dai Li, I was so worried-" He gulped, and got it out. "I invaded your privacy this morning. I'm sorry. I had to know, you were right there with Uncle and those marines, and if something had set off a Dai Li trigger - I had to *know*. But that doesn't make it right." He bowed. "I have tread along the boundaries of your honor, and I am sorry."

The earthbender frowned. "You thought the Dai Li bent my brain?"

"Amaya showed me how to look for the signs," Zuko said plainly, not rising. "But it takes water. I don't know how to do it with fire yet. I couldn't risk getting caught."

She was silent. He didn't dare lift his head to look. Toph might be blind, but she could sense movement in ways he could never deceive.

"So what'd you do?"

Not forgiveness. But she didn't sound angry. Yet. "I... felt the storm of your mind," Zuko said, trying to put the feel of it into words. "A healthy mind has - I don't know, *edges*. Kind of. Someone who's mindbent... it's like someone polished the edges down. Flattened them. It really doesn't feel good." He swallowed. "The edges are... emotions. Things you really *feel* about. I don't know *what* you feel them about, but... they're yours, and I felt them, and that was rude."

Toph marched into his personal space, arms crossed. "So. You poked into my head to make sure nobody *else* messed around in there."

Still looking down, he nodded. "I did."

"Yeah, I think that's enough groveling." Toph grinned.

Groveling? Zuko straightened, a breath away from calling fire.

"Whoa!" Toph held up her hands. "Teasing! You know, what friends do?" She cocked her head, listening. "You... really don't like that word. Why?"

Friends. Zuko kept himself from shuddering. "I grew up in the palace. You know what kind of people got access there under Fire Lord Azulon? *Friends* always saw Azula first." Why waste time on the brat who couldn't bend, after all? Much less the one who'd never be a prodigy. "I'd rather have an ally. There are things allies won't do. Not without warning you the alliance is off."

"Got it," Toph nodded seriously. Grinned again, a little more wry. "Softie."

"What?"

"Temporary alliance? You were *worried* about me." Toph buffed her nails on her robe. "It wasn't the Dai Li. Just two idiot bounty hunters sent by my parents. Can you imagine that? What kind of family sends people out to drag you back in a metal box?"

"Wouldn't know," Zuko deadpanned. "The Fire Lord sent Azula with chains." He grimaced, and shook his head. "How'd you get away?"

Toph smirked. "How much do you want to know?"

That set off every nerve that had ever listened in on ministers and merchants negotiating. *She's got something good. And she knows it.* "What are you asking?"

Toph lost the brave smile. "Aang's hurt. It's bad. He's breathing, he's not dying... but he's not waking up, either. Sokka got his dad to give everybody a truce so Uncle can help." She crossed her arms. "I'm betting you can do better."

...The spirits really, really hate me. "Maybe," Zuko said levelly. "I know what Uncle's taught me about lightning. And I studied what Amaya had in her scrolls. But I'm an apprentice."

"Yeah; it's amateur night all over," Toph said wryly. "You up for it?"

"Healing takes concentration," Zuko said flatly. "I'm not working near Katara without someone to watch my back. In case she decides to put a knife in it."

Toph frowned. "You're gonna be helping Aang. She won't-"

"She called me a *monster*, Toph!" Agni, it still hurt. He'd treated her as an honorable opponent, he'd *wanted* to believe anyone who could defeat him deserved that much respect... and she'd flung it in his face. "She looks at me, and all she sees is the man who murdered her mother!"

"But you didn't," Toph objected, stunned.

"You want to use *logic* on Katara?" Zuko smirked. "Go ahead. I'll watch."

Toph scowled at him, lifting a finger to jab-

Stopped. Thought about it. "Okay. Maybe you've got a point. I'll try and get on her good side-"

"Don't waste your time," Zuko said grimly. "It's better if you don't try to talk her into anything. If she thinks you're only on her side, she won't get prickly when you watch me to make sure I'm not doing anything evil to Aang."

"Twisted," Toph said thoughtfully. "Pretty smart, but twisted." She frowned. "You really don't like Sugar Queen, do you?"

"Why should I?" Zuko said flatly. "I saved Katara from running into Azula, and all she can think is that I'm just like my father. Just like some Fire Nation murderer I've never even *met*." He drew in a snarling breath. "Sokka at least listened."

Toph brightened. "You are going to help!"

"Yes," Zuko admitted quietly. "But I don't want Katara to know why."

Toph's toes felt the sand. "Because of this plan Uncle doesn't want Chief Hakoda knowing about?"

Chief Hakoda's here? Oh, wonderful. "What do you know?" Zuko said warily.

"You've got a plan to get Earth and Fire people living together, to try and fix things if the war stops," Toph said seriously. "Is Huojin part of the plan?" She tilted her head when he hesitated. "Hey, I know Fire Nation voices when I hear 'em. Huojin sure sounds like Ba Sing Se on the surface, but under that? He's kind of... crackly. Like you. And Uncle."

"He might be," Zuko admitted. "It's his decision. We have a plan. Uncle thinks it can work. But it won't, if we're anywhere near Aang. And Katara hates us. If she knew, she'd try to wreck it. No matter how many people got hurt."

"You don't want to be near Aang?" Toph said carefully. "That's going to make catching him pretty hard."

"Doesn't matter," Zuko said simply. "It's over. Taking the Avatar won't save my people. I'm done."

Blind eyes got round. "But if you don't bring Aang back, Azula-"

"She's going to be the heir, no matter what I do," Zuko said bitterly. "Fire is the *superior element*. That's what everybody's taught. If the Fire Sages find out what I can do..." His fists clenched. "It's over, Toph. I can *never* regain my honor." He let out a breath. "But I don't want Katara to know that. Or anyone in the Water Tribe. If they think I'm still after Aang, they think they've got a hold on me. Which means they won't try for..." He couldn't say it. The thought was too horrible.

"Uncle," Toph gulped. "You think Katara would let someone hurt him?"

"He's the *Dragon of the West*," Zuko bit out. "The Earth Kingdom wants him dead or in chains. Who do you think is supplying Chief Hakoda's fleet? And if it comes down to keeping a truce or helping her people - yes. She would. And she'd have the *right*. She's a *waterbender*."

"You lost me, Sparky," Toph admitted. "They're Hakoda's kids, sure. But I thought they got treated like everyone else."

"Sokka is Hakoda's-?" Zuko shook his head as it suddenly ached. "I was up against... no *wonder* he halfway knew what he was doing." He snorted, memories of months on the ice shimmering like air over embers. Fishing, gathering with the women, hunting seals with a flash of red scales... He'd listened to anyone who would talk to him, trying to understand the people Aang might have gone to. Southern waterbenders weren't all arrogant, but far too many would just as soon freeze an

outsider as look at him. He remembered one particularly vicious young lady who'd almost iced him over; Hama, wasn't it...?

Urgh. Need breakfast. Did he honestly think he was remembering *seal-hunts* at the South Pole? Figuring out Sokka must have been more of a shock than he'd thought. *Uncle would never let me hear the end of this*, Zuko thought wryly. *A couple thousand history scrolls, a couple years at sea reading when there's nothing else to do, and you're dreaming you were there.*

But the point remained, no matter where he'd dragged up the facts from. "No wonder she thinks she's got the right to judge," Zuko muttered. "Chief's daughter and a waterbender. Who's going to tell her no?"

"Still lost me," Toph said impatiently. "So she's a waterbender. Big deal."

"It is," Zuko said plainly. "You're Earth Kingdom. Oma and Shu were human. Benders know it's something anyone could learn, if they had the gift. The Water Tribes *worship* the Ocean and the Moon. Waterbenders are *blessed*. Nine hundred years ago Avatar Kuruk said women were born to heal, and the Northern Tribe has kept that up ever since. They don't train women to fight. Even when they know the Fire Nation is just biding their time to take them out."

"You know about an Avatar nine hundred years ago?" Toph took a step back, startled.

"I studied every Avatar I could find scrolls on," Zuko said impatiently. "Roku, Kyoshi, Kuruk, Yangchen, Hirata... I had no idea what might help me find Aang. The point is, Katara's Southern Tribe. The Northern Tribe can get *something* off the land, even if it's just pasturing reindeer-yaks on the tundra. Katara's tribe lives on the raw edge; everything they have is what they win from the sea and the ice. Families waterbenders liked thrived. People who crossed them never made it back to shore. That's the stories Katara grew up with. That's what she thinks waterbenders should be." His shoulders slumped. "I guess I thought she might be different. That she might have learned something, traveling with the Avatar. But... it doesn't look like she has. And if she can't believe I'm not trying to capture Aang when I'm trying to *save you from Azula*-" He blew out frustrated steam. "Then she might as well keep thinking that. Instead of believing I'm up to something even more evil."

Toph's toes drummed the sand. "Okay, I buy that. But there's something else you're not telling me."

"Lots," Zuko deadpanned. "Live with it."

"Lots of things don't make you panicky when you think about hanging around near Aang," Toph shot back. "You want to grab Uncle and head for the hills, plan or no plan. And I know you're a good guy, where it counts. You wouldn't just leave Aang hurting without a reason. Talk."

Zuko kept his fists from clenching. "I don't like spirits tampering with my life. Aang's the *Avatar*. Being within a mile of him is like hopping on a mountaintop in a thunderstorm, in armor, sticking your tongue out at the lightning-spirits. Does that answer your question?"

"You? *So* need a vacation." Toph cracked her knuckles. "Okay, you convinced me. So if you're going to pay up... let me tell you about iron, earth, and the *greatest* earthbender in the world."

"I swear, Lieutenant, nothing got past me!"

"Well *something* must have, or he'd still be in there," the armored woman growled back. "Damn it, the captain is going to-" she cut herself off, visibly steaming.

Panicking firebenders, Hakoda thought, watching from what he hoped was a reasonable distance. *Not as much fun as I thought.*

Certainly not fun when his two children were in the same camp, and most of his warriors were either asleep or desperately wanted to be. The Fire Nation custom of being up at the crack of dawn was *crazy*.

And here you are, just as crazy, making sure you're here to catch the sparks, Hakoda reminded himself ruefully.

Though there hadn't been any sparks. Yet. All the Fire Navy men - and however many women - had behaved... politely. Which didn't make sense.

Katara had told him about the Fire Nation's hunt for the Avatar, words sluicing out of her like a spring thaw before she could finally sleep. Prince Zuko had been their most ruthless hunter, but any Fire Nation force within sighting distance of Appa would surge after the young airbender like a leopard-shark spotting a bait-ball of marlin-tuna. The Fire Lord *wanted* Aang, alive or dead. Wanted him badly enough to risk an entire invasion fleet trying to take the North Pole; ships and men that could have guaranteed taking Ba Sing Se, without the incredible net of treachery and deception woven by Princess Azula and the Dai Li.

Yet here was the Avatar, helpless, with only his daughter, little Toph, and Hakoda's fleet to protect him. And the Fire Nation was doing *nothing*.

Not quite true, Hakoda admitted to himself. *They're keeping vigil.*

Which also didn't make sense. Prince Zuko might be his daughter's own personal grudge, but as far as the Fire Nation was concerned? Not only was he banished, with no honor, he wasn't even a good firebender. How could he be, given he'd been unskilled enough to be scarred by fire? True, some in the Fire Nation might not want Azula as the heir, but no one doubted her power. Zuko was a match; she was an inferno. Everyone knew it.

Everyone but Sokka.

Hakoda frowned, considering that. Usually, if he'd gotten reliable news from a host of people, with only one dissenting voice, the loner was looked at suspiciously. But Sokka wasn't relying on secondhand traders' tales or relatives' advice. His son had *fought* Prince Zuko. And no matter what *everyone* knew, Sokka believed the young firebender was as dangerous as an ice viper who'd just found her nest of eggs shattered.

If this Captain Jee was on Zuko's ship... he'd know it, too.

Which didn't even begin to take into account the fact that Hakoda knew - *knew* - Sokka had his father's gift. The gift that had made their line chiefs for generations. The knack for seeing things not as everyone wanted them to be, but as they truly were. And, at times even more important, as they *might* be.

So tell yourself a story, Hakoda thought wryly. *In this story Sokka is right, and the boy's a far more dangerous firebender than anyone realizes. Except for his uncle - who was once the heir himself - and the captain of his ship. Spirits, go ahead and make it a truly wild one; say the captain's as honorable as Zuko tried to be in that desert. And he doesn't want Azula as the heir either.*

In that story... what would an honorable Fire Navy captain do?

Protect his nation. By protecting the only sane heir Ozai had. Even if it meant leaving the Fire

Nation's most deadly enemy *completely untouched*.

Aang's injuries were severe enough to make Hakoda wince at the thought of moving him, even with Katara's care. The Fire Lord might not care if the Avatar died... but Zuko needed the boy alive.

I could be wrong. Sokka and I could both be wrong. But if I'm right...

Then the situation was both safer and more dangerous that he'd realized. This wasn't an ordinary Fire Nation force, arrogant and deadly but prone to withdraw rather than suffer massive casualties. These were desperate men, willing to skirt the edge of the Fire Lord's own orders for their prince's sake.

I need to warn Bato and the others. Until I have a better sense of these soldiers, we need to be very careful. Hakoda straightened his shoulders, and approached the shelter. "Is there a problem?"

"No." A massive yawn, as Iroh walked out of Toph's shelter. "Relax, Lieutenant Teruko. My nephew has most likely just taken a walk. It is a habit of his, when he is worried."

"Took a *walk*?" Teruko sputtered. "We've been on watch!"

And so have my men, Hakoda frowned.

"He walks very quietly," Iroh said cheerfully. "It is all right, Captain Jee knows of his habits... ah. Chief Hakoda?"

Bending over sand near one edge of the shelter, Hakoda raised an interested brow. "*Very quietly*," he agreed wryly. The trail was faint. Sandals, not the boots he'd expected. And it stuttered, in a way that didn't quite look human-

Hakoda stopped, and looked, as the young man he was following would have looked. *He saw the sentries. And they didn't see him.*

Intrigued, the chieftain went back to the trail, building a fresher picture of the prince than either the unconscious boy he'd seen in Iroh's arms, or the supernaturally determined firebender Sokka had sketched with words and waving hands.

He didn't just see the sentries. He knew they'd be there.

Not a surprise, from a military-trained firebender. But the patience and stealth needed to turn that knowledge into a successful stalk and evasion... that was startling.

This is a prince?

It didn't fit the image he'd formed of a royal heir after meeting a few too many arrogant Earth Kingdom nobles. Which made Hakoda wonder what else might not fit.

You hesitated here; you saw the camp. You were startled, but you didn't attack anyone. Not exactly the hot temper Sokka had warned him of. You're meandering, but only enough to avoid sight; you have a goal. What?

"So, you think, if we heat up the sand...?" Toph's voice echoed around the next dune.

"Worth a try." Young, but with a low, rough edge that came from snapping out orders over the roar of battle. "Later."

"Aww. I was hoping we'd spook them." Toph grinned at them all as they rounded grassy sand.
"Hey, Uncle. Guess who's back in this century?"

Who, indeed. Hakoda took a long look, as Teruko muttered under her breath and Iroh beamed. No-nonsense green robes, unremarkable as any Earth Kingdom traveler, if you ignored the singes. Dark hair, just shaggy enough to shade pale gold eyes, and soften the edge of the worst burn scar Hakoda had ever seen on a living man. Taller than Sokka, and lean. Too lean; an eye trained by polar winters could mark almost to the day how long the prince had been on short rations, and when the universe had finally decided to ease up a bit.

Sokka's right. If he'd jumped this boy a few months back, he could have held him.

Not now. The prince's stance was proud, Fire Nation to the core... yet there was none of the stiff arrogance he'd seen in so many firebenders. Zuko was still. Waiting.

That, is a very dangerous young man.

A dangerous young man currently sizing both him and Teruko up, as if they each posed their own threat.

His own military? So. The prince really is a fugitive. Which made Captain Jee's actions all the more interesting-

"How did you get past the sentries?" Teruko demanded, steam rising from her breath.

Zuko didn't even twitch. "You blinked."

Iroh, Hakoda noted, looked quietly amused.

Toph wasn't quiet at all, cackling like an arctic hen. "Come on! Doesn't everybody know how sneaky you are?"

"Those with sight often do not watch as carefully as your feet," Iroh declared. Gave Teruko a tolerant glance. "Truly, you have no reason to be shamed. My nephew has much practice in finding a way past insurmountable odds." He turned directly to the prince. "Nephew, this is Chief Hakoda, father of Sokka and Katara, who has offered a truce so we may work toward parallel goals. Chief Hakoda, my nephew, Prince Zuko, son of Ursa and Fire Lord Ozai."

Fire Nation formality. Hakoda had had a few brushes with it, and hadn't liked any of them. Though it was interesting to realize how much hinged on what the speaker *didn't* say. *I've offered a truce. But Iroh hasn't said the prince accepted it. This could get sticky.*

Zuko inclined his head. "Your son honors your name," he said formally. "He is usually outmatched in training and numbers, but he is persistent and inventive." A bare hint of a smirk. "Ask him to tell you about the dress."

Hakoda blinked. "Dress?"

"Ooo, that's just mean," Toph snickered.

"He helped execute a skilled ambush and strategic withdrawal," Zuko stated wryly. "A soldier's superiors should know all the pertinent details, so his accomplishments can receive their just reward."

Hakoda added everything up, and started to chuckle. The prince might be an untrustworthy, vicious

firebender he'd just as soon punt out to sea in a block of ice, but... "My son fought you off in a dress?" *Oh, Sokka. You're going to have to share this one.*

"For his first time wearing armor, he didn't do too badly." Zuko's face went cold, all humor gone. "Your daughter is a powerful and determined bender, and she's going to get herself killed."

Iroh held up a warding hand before Hakoda could tense. "That is not a threat," the retired general said swiftly. "My nephew has no skill at diplomacy. But he is honest. Please, listen."

"You'd better have a very good reason that's not a threat," Hakoda said evenly.

"I don't want to have to kill her," Zuko said quietly. "Is that good enough?"

Truce, Hakoda reminded himself as Iroh sighed. *We have a truce.* "You're not very convincing at not threatening my daughter."

"Man!" Toph flung up her hands. "What is it with you, Sparky? Do you just look scary, or something?"

Sparky? Hakoda thought, incredulous. The girl was Earth Kingdom. She had to know the prince was an enemy. No matter how benevolently Iroh might smile over tea.

"Yeah," Zuko said softly. "I do."

She's blind, Hakoda remembered. It was easy to forget, given how well the young earthbender moved. *She has no idea how awful he looks. Even Bato's scars aren't that-*

Hakoda's eyes narrowed, examining that thought. Bato had gained his scars in combat, and they looked it; ragged, wavering, clear sign he'd tried to dodge. The prince's... the closest he'd ever seen was the heart-wound on executed Earth Kingdom soldiers. One precise blast of fire.

It looks... wrong.

"So much for seeing," Toph said impatiently. "Okay, so he's scary. He's *right*. Katara, Sokka, Aang - they're my friends. But back in Ba Sing Se? Katara said stuff, did stuff..." She winced. "I'm worried about her. And Zuko met Katara way before I did. So he kind of does know her."

"Met her, by threatening my mother," Hakoda said pointedly.

Zuko grimaced. "Would it help if I said I regret that?"

Teruko stirred. "Sir-"

"It was inadvisable, Lieutenant," Zuko said formally. "The *Wani* was my ship, not a ship of war. The village was just civilians, and one young man who should have stuck to his boomerang instead of trying to use a spear in his first combat. Starting out by going face-to-face with lethal intent? He was just asking to freeze up..." He shook his head. "I have a temper, and I didn't think. We're at war. But it was less than honorable to threaten someone who turned out to be carrying no weapons."

"Turned out to- she's an old woman!" Hakoda exclaimed.

"I see you have never met a Fire Nation grandmother." Amusement glittered in Iroh's green eyes. "I advise that you tell Sokka to treat them as warily as he would Mai. After all, who does he think gave the girl her first knife set?"

Green eyes? Hakoda realized. *But firebenders have... something's strange here.* "Fine, then," he said levelly. "Tell me what you know, that I apparently don't, about my own daughter."

Pale fists clenched; slowly, loosened. "My orders were to capture the Avatar, alive," the prince stated, careful as a man picking his way over rotten ice. "Your daughter decided to make herself an obstacle. But I had no orders about her, so I could choose to avoid lethal force. We've fought. She's tried to kill me. She tried the same tactics on Azula and the Dai Li. Only *they* didn't want her alive." Zuko's jaw was set. "The Avatar could have taken Katara and flown away on his airstaff. He's done it before. I didn't see what happened, but I've fought Katara. And I know my sister. I'd guess Katara thought she could take Azula... and Azula *let* her think that. Long enough to keep Aang fighting, until he was exactly where she wanted him." He let out a slow hiss of breath. "I warned her. General Iroh warned her. She *doesn't listen*."

Hakoda gave the young man a skeptical look. "And you expected her to listen to an enemy?"

"It is the custom among our people that when two deadly foes are faced by an even more powerful enemy, they may make a temporary alliance, until the danger has passed," Iroh said levelly. "Such cooperation brings no dishonor to either side. Indeed, in our past, such alliances could prove the basis for a long-lasting truce. Even an end to hostilities, if circumstances and honor permitted." Short and gray, he gave Hakoda a look that reminded the chief of his own father. "Yes. We hoped she would listen. And so we warn you now, as one honorably holding truce with us." He glanced at Zuko. "I believe there is breakfast."

"Good," Zuko said wryly. "I was wondering if I was going to have to fish-" Hand tucked up one sleeve, he froze.

"Nephew?" Iroh said carefully.

Slowly, Zuko brought out his hand, holding a blackened lump of metal. Looked at it. Swallowed.

That looks like... melted fishhooks?

Iroh drew in a sharp breath. "Lieutenant Teruko. I believe this may be the proof you asked for."

"Proof of what?" Hakoda gave the armored firebender a narrow look as she accepted blackened steel. "They're melted. He's a firebender."

"Not melted," Teruko said soberly. "Welded. That takes extreme heat, or..."

"Lightning," Zuko said levelly. Glanced at his uncle, a sudden hesitance behind the formal mask. "Did anyone... when I redirected...?"

"There were several concussions, I believe." Iroh's smile was kind. "Come. Let us ease the lieutenant's duties, so she may send word to Captain Jee."

Relief flickered in gold eyes, and Hakoda raised an interested brow. "He thought you were dead, too. Something about a ship blowing up?"

The mask slammed back down, and the prince regarded him coolly. "Yes. It did."

Interesting. That doesn't sound like what I'd expect, if it were enemy action, Hakoda thought. *So either some firebending got out of hand - and from Sokka, Zuko's not that bad - or...*

Fire Nation politics. Give the enemy points for consistency; they were as vicious to each other as they were to every other nation.

But would someone dare do that to the heir? Who? *Why?*

"Ow. That sounds like a nasty story- Oh no." Toph winced. "Heads up. She's *ticked*."

"I can see that," Zuko muttered under his breath, glancing out at the ships.

No, not the ships, Hakoda realized. *The waves*.

Waves suddenly half a foot higher than they should be, given the falling tide. Hakoda frowned, recalling what Sokka had said about anger, and benders. He'd heard stories about waterbenders, yes. But he'd always thought they had to be exaggerated. Angry wishes for vengeance, from a people who dared not admit they were dying.

Zuko's expression didn't change. He simply glanced at Iroh, and headed back to camp.

That's a firebender for you. Hit the enemy head on.

Even so, Hakoda knew the moment Zuko saw his daughter. He'd seen men stiffen like that before. When spears flashed, and blood flew.

"What do you think you're doing?" Katara demanded, fists on her hips.

"Being blackmailed," Zuko deadpanned.

"*What?*"

Hakoda had to hand it to the young man. Even faced with his daughter's scowl, Zuko just kept moving.

Katara kept ahead of him, pace for angry pace. "You lied to us."

Teruko... *snarled*, was the best Hakoda could describe it. If snarls included a geyser's puff of steam. "You dare!"

"Oh, you better believe I dare," Katara snapped back. "Look around! That's an *ocean*. And you don't have an army backing you up this time-"

"What. Do you think. I did?" Zuko gritted out.

"As if you don't know!"

"Actually? I'd say he doesn't," Toph put in. "Want to tell me, Sweetness? 'Cause I'm kind of thinking it'd be hard for Zuko to have done anything. There's this *little* fact that he's been *out cold*?"

"He told us he wasn't working with Azula," Katara snapped.

"Um, duh?" Toph shrugged. "She wants him dead."

Hakoda blinked, taken aback. *Oh, Tui and La*. If *that* was the case, if Princess Azula wasn't waiting for exile to do her competition in, but taking an active hand... His guests were desperate men, indeed.

"Really?" Katara studied the prince, then batted her eyes in mock concern. "Gee, and I thought Azula was supposed to be this horrible, evil, insane person. He looks awfully alive to me."

"Miss Katara," Iroh reproved.

"No! No excuses. No *explanations*. He just *happens* to show up just when Azula does? Just *happens* to survive lightning that took down Aang?" She glared at the prince. "He's the *Avatar*! And you, you're just a spoiled failure who-"

A foot around Zuko, sand roared into flames.

And *out*, before Hakoda could finish drawing in breath to shout. Zuko *looked* at his daughter, and the chained fury there made Hakoda long for a whalebone machete.

"Lightning is firebending." The prince's words cut like razors. "Aang doesn't know firebending. He doesn't know any blocks. I do. And Azula still almost killed me. *Again*." Zuko advanced; one deliberate, stalking step. "I found Azula the same way I find the Avatar; because I know how to track things. The Avatar's *easy*. You just look for the places only an *idiot* would go, and there he is." Another threatening step. "Azula's harder. She's smart. Much smarter than you. I usually can't find her before she finds me. But I know *how* to find her. Just look for the one place and time she can destroy *everything* you've worked for... and she's there ahead of you." He breathed, slow and deliberate. "I knew Azula was in the palace. I saw that damn bison!" One hand flung out like an accusation, toward the massive furry beast just lumbering back into camp after grazing dune grasses further inland. "Draw a *map*."

Hakoda made himself look away from that blazing, angry presence, watching Iroh, his own men, and tense dark-armored enemies. The old general looked calm, if not happy. Bato was keeping their men civil with a nod and a glance. And the Fire Navy people...

Angry. They're very angry. But they're holding back. We can still salvage this-

Hakoda stared in disbelief as Katara's hand dropped to her waterskin, and the prince tensed, and steel bristled in armored hands-

Iroh's voice snapped like flame. "Are you done insulting your chief's generosity?"

Bato's brows shot up, curious and wary at once.

"Yes," Hakoda said firmly, all too aware of his obligations as a chief. No matter how unpleasant their guests. "She is."

Zuko glanced at him, good eye narrowed. Nodded once, rigidly. Turned away from Katara, and headed for the sandbent shelter.

Katara reddened. "Don't you turn your back on-"

"Katara." Hakoda had never used the tone of a chief to a warrior about to get people killed to his daughter before. He'd never thought he'd have to.

At least the prince is as good as his word.

And the rest of those fire-breathing menaces were following his lead. Even Teruko, whose stiff shoulders shouted that she'd like to fry Katara on the spot.

And the worst thing is, I can't completely disagree with her. "Toph?" Hakoda said calmly. "Would you mind taking over from Sokka for a while? I'd like to speak to both my children about this... situation."

Toph grinned wryly, deliberately walking past him as she headed for the healer's tent. "Good luck," she muttered.

At least Katara still had enough respect for her father to follow him into his tent before she erupted. "Talk? What's there to talk about? Iroh said Zuko was sick. Obviously, he's not anymore, so why are they still *here*-"

"Let's wait for your brother," Hakoda interrupted.

Fuming, she crossed her arms and shut up.

Sokka pushed into the tent a minute later. "What's going on? Toph said the truce almost flew apart at the seams!"

"Yes," Hakoda said plainly. "It almost did." He raised an eyebrow at his daughter. "Do you want to tell me why?"

"Oh, man," Sokka groaned in disbelief.

"Oh, like you never went after Zuko with your boomerang," Katara shot back.

"Not when we were trying to get his help! Remember the ghost town?" Sokka's hands sketched empty streets, dust blowing in the wind. "Azula went after Iroh, and we all went after her? Zuko warned us about her because he *owed* us. You think he doesn't owe us now?"

"We don't need him!"

"Yeah, I think we do," Sokka said bluntly, obviously holding on to his own temper. "Every day Aang's out cold is one less day he's got to learn bending. We've got less than two months to get ready. Two healers have got to be able to help him faster than one."

"You want to trust Aang to someone who attacks you first?" Katara snarled back. "He *hit* me, Sokka! Right in the middle of the street! He didn't even give me a chance to fight back! He's insane, just like that whole little underground fan-club of his! All I wanted to do was help those little kids, break them out of that inner fire Meixiang was talking about - and she threatened me with a knife! Me! Aang's teacher! She said she'd try to kill me rather than let me heal them without asking! She-"

"Whoa. Whoa!" Sokka broke in. "Inner fire?"

"Some excuse Meixiang was using for why the Dai Li were going to follow Azula." Katara rolled her eyes. "She said some firebenders could do it. And since they had this crazy idea Zuko was trying to *help* them-"

"Not sure if you noticed, but the Dai Li *did* work for Azula," Sokka pointed out.

"So? We knew Long Feng was a weevil-rat, bending people's minds!"

Sokka let out a frustrated breath. "So what did you think Madam Wen thought *you* were?"

Katara gaped, then narrowed angry eyes at her brother. "I was going to heal them!"

"You were going after a crazy idea? Then you were going to *bend* their *minds*," Sokka said bluntly. "Who's the only people Ba Sing Se knows who do that?"

"I'm not Dai Li!"

"Yeah, well, according to Huojin? We're the reason they were *running* from the Dai Li." Sokka looked angry; with her, Hakoda realized, but most of all with himself. "Aang promised to help

them. But did we ever do it? No. We just headed for the Earth King and trusted everything would work out. Well, it *didn't*."

"Oh? And whose fault is that, Mr. Positive Attitude?" Katara's voice dripped mock sweetness.

Both of Hakoda's brows went up. He hadn't heard that tone since... well, since his own mother had shredded a tribesman who frankly deserved it. *Kanna, what have you been teaching her?*

"You're right," Sokka said soberly. "It is my fault. Dad wanted me to look after you, and I should have done it. Which means I should have put my foot down a long time ago and gotten you two to *listen* to me. Aang's not a warrior. He's just a goofy kid-

"He's the Avatar!"

"And that's why he got to *stop acting like a kid!*" Sokka finally yelled. "He can't just promise things and expect *someone else* to fix them. Or make *excuses* why he shouldn't *have* to fix them. You're not his mother, Katara! Mom wouldn't let us get away with *half* of what Aang does!"

"Enough," Hakoda said firmly, planting himself between the red-faced siblings. "*Enough.*" He glanced between them, face stern. "I see this has been building up for a while. And I want to talk to you both more, later. But *at this moment*, it has to wait. Sokka. As a warrior of the tribe, do you believe Prince Zuko will be willing to help Aang?"

"Toph says he already said yes," Sokka reported, angry red slowly fading from his cheeks. "Said she traded him talking about metalbending for it."

Metal bending? Hakoda thought, incredulous. *That's no ordinary earthbender.*

"Figures," Katara snorted. "He wouldn't ever help just because it was the *right* thing to do."

"Why do you care why he does it?" Sokka said, exasperated. "So he wants Aang in one piece to haul back to the Fire Lord. Last time I checked? He's tried that before. And we beat him. The important thing is, we'll get Aang in one piece. We can handle it from there. Unless you don't think a master waterbender can handle one Fire Navy ship."

"Oh, I can handle it, all right," Katara said grimly. "I'd like to *handle* it right now-

"No," Hakoda said firmly. "We have a truce. That's honored among our people, Katara. I don't care if their tribe was killing ours yesterday. Today we have a truce, and I'd be no excuse for a chief if I broke it."

"We make truces with *people!*"

Kanna, when I get back there, we need to have a long talk, Hakoda thought grimly. "And we've made one with these people, for the sake of your friend. And you are going to honor it, as the chief's daughter." He nodded toward the tent wall, in the direction of the Fire Navy's mooring. "In the Fire Nation, the commander's honor touches the honor of every man serving under him. They have to defend it. And the captain of that ship has ordered them to protect Prince Zuko." He drew a breath. "Stop insulting him. By all the spirits, stop threatening to *attack* him. And if you can't stand to look your enemy in the eye without drawing blood, then for all our sakes, just stay away from him."

Blue eyes stared up at him, wide with disbelief. "How can you take *their* side? You know what they did to Mom!"

It twisted in Hakoda's heart. He could only imagine how much it hurt his daughter. "A chief has to think of the good of his people," he said softly. "No matter what he wants. If Aang is the best hope for the world, then I have to do the best thing I can think of to help him. Right now, that means holding a truce with men I don't trust. Men I hate. Men I *know* are our enemies." He smiled at both of them, bittersweet. "I have to do that. And then I have to trust that together, we'll be clever enough to outsmart them."

Sokka gave him a determined grin, and a thumbs-up. Katara blinked, a fragile smile surfacing under watery eyes.

Something's wrong. Glancing at Sokka, Hakoda nodded toward the tent flap. "Would you go ask Bato what he thinks of that ship of theirs? You've seen the other ship the prince had; you may be able to tell him something we haven't noticed before."

"On it, Dad." Sokka vanished outside.

"Katara," Hakoda said gently, as cloth settled. "What's wrong? What happened in Ba Sing Se?"

"I..." Katara's breath hitched. She gulped. "I *hate cities*, Dad! They look so clean, and everyone dresses *so* nice, and it's all seal fur over razors. You should have heard what some girls said to us, and Toph is *blind*..."

It roared out of her like a breached Earth Kingdom dam; four weeks of being lost and alone in the most massive, lonely, proud city on the planet. Four weeks of being useless; what good was a woman of the tribe when food, clothing, and shelter was all handed to you? Four weeks of being helpless, knowing they couldn't fight in or even speak of the war inside the walls, not with Long Feng's threat about Aang *never* finding Appa hanging over their heads. Four weeks of being *handled*, knowing people were fighting and dying while the Earth King refused to listen...

Hakoda held her while she sobbed, heart aching. His daughter had been such a responsible little girl since Kya died. Long Feng couldn't have found a more vicious way to hurt her if he'd tried.

I wonder if he knew that, the scheming ice viper.

One way or another, a certain Grand Secretariat of Ba Sing Se deserved to *suffer* for hurting his little girl. Something to think about and polish ideas for on lonely nights, to use at just the right moment.

Still. There was something else in Katara's litany of hurt that made Hakoda frown. *It's all about Aang*, he realized. *Sokka's her brother, and Toph's her friend, and except for those snobby noble girls, she's barely mentioned them.*

Granted, the boy was the Avatar. And Katara had always believed in legends of the Avatar returning to save the world. But those were legends, meant for winter nights and hope. Sometimes, a man just had to stand on his own two feet and fight, even when there *was* no hope. Because you never knew. A rogue wave might turn a ship at just the right moment. A stone might slide under an enemy's foot, sparing you that final blow.

A banished prince might have the truth and honor Sokka swears he does, and agree to help. Even if he does plan to attack us later.

As Sokka had said, the firebender didn't give up - which meant as soon as Aang was well enough to move, all truces were likely to be over. And yet...

There's something odd about that young man.

An oddness that seemed to linger around Sokka, as well, once he'd started looking. Something that stirred the hairs on the back of his neck, like a ghost-wind off the ice...

Firebender. Of course Zuko upsets everyone, Hakoda told himself. If Aang didn't need them, I'd just as soon let Katara have her way, and give their ship and bodies to the ocean. If this is the prince, and General Iroh... they owe us blood.

Sokka hadn't asked why he and Bato knew so much about Prince Zuko, and Hakoda didn't feel inclined to tell him. Not yet. Not when he was still fitting together what he'd seen of the prince today with the story he'd pieced together from survivors of Ilaq's ship a little over a year ago, picking up burned and exhausted Water Tribe men from Fire Nation life rafts.

Boiled down, Ilaq had happened on a lone, small Fire Navy ship, and decided it was as good a target as any. Especially given it didn't seem to be in any shape to put up a fight. It'd pretty much sat there, smoke pouring out of a boiler, obviously having the kind of trouble wind and sails never suffered. Easy prey.

Except that easy target had had at least seven firebenders on board. Including an old man... and a scarred youngster Sokka's age, with the gold-collared armor of high rank.

Ilaq's ship hadn't survived that encounter. Neither had Ilaq.

Angry as that memory made him, what still struck him most about the aftermath was its *strangeness*. The Fire Navy ship had claimed they weren't part of the war, insane as that sounded, and that they didn't *want* to fight.

And then they'd won... and left without prisoners, and without executing those who'd survived.

They didn't even leave my men to die, Hakoda frowned. It doesn't make sense.

Unless they'd been telling the *truth*; at least, as the Fire Nation saw it. Warships took prisoners. Warships killed everything else in their path. If the prince's ship was not considered a warship, but just *his*, to carry him on his hunt for the Avatar...

He's Fire Nation. He's the enemy. But Sokka seems convinced he's not cruel.

Katara, though...

"And the worst thing about cities?" Katara gulped. "They fit Zuko like a glove! You should have seen him in the ghost town, he - he was pathetic! Tired and hungry and he didn't know what he was doing, if I hadn't helped him Iroh would have died - I actually felt *sorry* for him! Toph told us he was exiled, that he couldn't go home, and I thought about how awful that was, even if he was the worst person in the world. But in Ba Sing Se? Iroh had a teashop in the *Inner Ring*! They were rich! Right in the middle of the Earth Kingdom, just streets away from the palace, and the worst people in the *world* were living just like anyone else! Like they could forget their own war!" She tore loose from his arms, almost vibrating across the tent. "Zuko was working as a healer. A *healer*! They wouldn't let *me* be a healer. They wanted me to sit down and answer questions from this stuck-up old prune before they'd even think about it, and she couldn't even waterbend, what did she know? And they let *him*? Who'd his uncle bribe for that license? How many people has he hurt? *What gave him the right?*"

Hakoda pursed his lips in a silent whistle. *I haven't seen this in a while.* Not since just before Kya had been murdered, when his lovely but headstrong little daughter had had to be *forced* to give back a particularly favored playmate's doll. "So he had something you wanted."

"He had *everything*! When he should have been scraping along in a ditch somewhere, so he could see what happens to everyone else in the Fire Nation's war! Maybe then he'd understand. Maybe then he'd actually *care* about all those innocent people fleeing to Ba Sing Se." Katara flung up her hands. "Only I guess some of them weren't innocent at all. They were listening to Zuko! Can you believe that? They wouldn't listen to me or Aang, oh no, but the Wens actually thought he was trying to help them hide from the Dai Li. And from Azula. And whose fault was it Azula was even *there*?"

One eyebrow raised, Hakoda regarded his daughter.

"What?" Katara burst out at last.

"As you, Sokka, and Toph have all told me," Hakoda observed, "Azula is after Aang."

"And them!" Katara objected.

"Except that from what you've said, Zuko and Iroh were doing their best to blend into the city," Hakoda said wryly. "Not dodging Fire Navy warships through the Serpent's Pass. Or wrecking massive, wall-gnawing drills. Certainly not using a flying bison to invade the Earth King's own palace."

"We had to tell the king about the eclipse!"

"Of course you did," Hakoda agreed. "But in helping Aang do what he must for the world... Katara, you have to see you all made it plain *exactly* where the Avatar was."

Katara stared at him, wide-eyed. "You think it's our fault?"

"Anything you do in war can reveal you to the enemy," Hakoda said honestly. "We lay mines to stop the Fire Navy. It works," *Well, until this ship*, "but that means they *know* we're around here somewhere. That isn't anyone's fault. It just *is*."

"I... guess I didn't think about that." Katara glanced down. "Zuko... he just always *found* us, no matter what we did."

"You were riding a ten-ton sky bison," Hakoda said dryly. "I saw him at night, weeks ago, and I didn't even know what he was. People have to notice."

"That's what-" Katara bit the words off, grimacing.

That's what Zuko said? Hakoda wondered, recalling the prince's sharp-edged words. Now, *that* was worrisome. Not that the bison was visible; that the prince had noticed, used it, *told* his children, and they *still* hadn't caught on.

He'd faced several Fire Navy commanders these past two years. Some dangerously bright, some... not so bright. He had no idea how smart Zuko's father was, and no one seemed to breathe a word about whatever unlucky woman had granted the Fire Lord offspring, but given Fire Lord Ozai's *brother* still sent cold chills down Earth Kingdom spines... the young man could be very dangerous indeed.

Either that, or he's survived everything Sokka could throw at him through pure, dumb luck.

Hakoda wasn't about to count on luck. Not with his children in camp. "Better now?"

Katara bit her lip, and nodded. "But Aang has to show the world he's out there. People need to

know the Avatar's back!"

"And they will," Hakoda agreed. "But not now. Not while he's hurt."

"You're right." Her chin came up, determined. "I should go look after him."

Hakoda followed her, just long enough to make sure she was heading for the healer's tent. Sighed, and headed for shore, where Bato was watching the Fire Navy steamer kick loose into the water.

"Where are they going?"

"To get the captain, they said," Bato said soberly. "No one's seen a hawk yet."

Hakoda nodded. You could intercept hawks, sometimes, though it didn't do much good. Fire Nation orders came in a script unlike any writing he'd seen anywhere else, and when they were feeling really paranoid, even that was in heat-sensitive ink. But there was a certain amount you could figure out just from knowing where the hawks were. And weren't. "He's stalling."

"Until reinforcements get here?" Bato frowned.

"The other way around, I think," Hakoda said thoughtfully. "If Princess Azula does want her brother dead..."

Bato whistled softly. "So is this Jee brave, or crazy?"

"I'm assuming both, for now," Hakoda admitted. "I want someone watching the prince, especially when he's near Aang." He tried not to wince. "And... someone's going to have to watch Katara as well."

"Oh?" Bato gave him a narrow look.

"Apparently, the prince managed to luck into some good fortune, and she's taken it as a personal slap in the face from the spirits." Hakoda couldn't hide the wince this time. Bato was his best friend, but - it was hard to say this about his own family. "She's acting like she's eight again. A *spoiled* eight."

"The boy's a wanted fugitive, his sister wants him dead, and he got hit by *lightning*," Bato said incredulously. "If that's what she calls good luck, I'm not having her bless my spears. No matter how good waterbenders are in with the Moon."

Hakoda sighed. "He really was a healer in Ba Sing Se."

Bato was silent a long moment. "Well, that's torn it. She wants his head on an ice spike."

"What? Why?" Hakoda asked, startled.

Bato chuckled ruefully. "That's right, you can't be anywhere near a birth, or..." He mimed falling over.

"No man's brave about everything," Hakoda said ruefully.

"True enough," his friend nodded. "But it means you didn't hear some of the talk, around those difficult times before we left."

Difficult births. Yes, they'd had a few. "Kanna handled them."

"She did, but you didn't hear what she said during them," Bato said soberly. "Being fair, I'm not

sure Kanna heard what she was saying; you say anything to get a mother through, when she thinks she can't take anymore. But Katara? She's that age. She heard *everything*."

"Everything?" Hakoda asked pointedly.

"Your mother blamed it all on the firebenders," Bato said bluntly. "No waterbenders to give the Moon's blessing before the birth. Or ease it while it was happening, when things went wrong." He gave Hakoda a pointed look. "She never said a *real* waterbender could heal, but she came *that* close."

Damn. Damn it all. He'd *begged* Kanna not to tell the stories of healing waterbenders. No point in reminding the tribe of what they might never have. No point in rousing anger, when men and women were injured and sickened and his little untrained daughter could do *nothing*. No point in loading Katara's shoulders with guilt for something even Kanna admitted would take her *years* to learn, if she could ever find a healing master.

It didn't matter how unlucky the prince was. Zuko had what she *wanted*. She'd never rest until she had it. Which had never been a problem so long as it drove his daughter to excel, but given what she now wanted belonged to a *Fire Nation prince*... Hakoda felt a headache coming on.

"I'll make sure there's a friendly eye on her," Bato assured him. Smiled wryly. "We're lucky, you know. All we have to deal with is a teenage girl who misses her mother. If Kanna had been right about master waterbenders and the will of the Moon, we'd have a real problem on our hands."

No kidding. Though how Kanna could be so *certain* waterbenders were beloved by all when firebenders had proved so well they didn't care-

"...Fire's the opposite of water," Hakoda murmured.

"Yes?" Bato gave him a curious look.

"They haven't told us everything," Hakoda stated, putting together facts and legends into an unsettling new shape. "But apparently Ba Sing Se upset her because it was the first place no one *listened* to her. Tui and La - Sokka said she got an entire earthbenders' prison barge to revolt!"

"She is a chief's daughter." But Bato's voice was uneasy.

"And would you expect Sokka to talk a prison barge into revolting?" Hakoda said pointedly.

Bato's silence was answer enough.

"Water is family and community," Hakoda thought out loud. "If waterbenders can sway most people's hearts..."

"But not firebenders?" Bato's brows drew down. "You don't think we're dealing with anything as simple as two teenagers who happen to be mortal enemies."

"I think we're dealing with two master benders," Hakoda said soberly. "And according to Sokka... things *happen* when benders get mad."

Keep an eye on him, you said. He'll surprise you, you said, Teruko thought grumpily, arranging herself between the prince and the shelter opening as her two charges sat down to breakfast. As if that had done any good last time. *Damn it, Captain, you didn't say he was a damn ghost.*

Jee hadn't mentioned the dao still lying by the fire, either. Or the calluses on the prince's hands that spoke of long, determined practice with steel most firebenders wouldn't deign to touch. You couldn't hide sword-practice on a *cruiser*. On the tiny *Wani*... there was no way Jee would have missed it.

Doesn't eat like a prince, either, Teruko thought, eyeing him. Not that Prince Zuko ate like a local; he kept his chopsticks to the side, never diving into a mouth where a sudden blow could stab them lethally deeper. Gripped the side of the bowl, not the bottom, where he could let it fall rather than have someone splash hot soup into his eyes. Correct. Proper. But those chopsticks flashed with the speed of a hungry recruit, and the single-minded determination of a sailor bent on downing one more hot meal before he dove back into the storm.

"Tea, Lieutenant?" Iroh offered. With an utter lack of concern at the absence of small talk that reminded Teruko of some of her own instructors. The good ones; men and women who knew exactly how hard they'd pushed their trainees, and just how much more they could take.

He knows the prince hasn't hit his limits, not yet, Teruko judged. *But he also knows we've got a long way to go.* "Yes, sir. Thank you." And never mind she was already sweating under her armor, she could use the calm...

Prince Zuko blinked at her, rinsed his bowl with a splash of hot water, gulped it down, and set it aside. "You've got to be roasting." Standing, he drew the fingers of his left hand through air, flowing into a sweep of his right up toward the opening.

Heat swept away like throwing off a set of blankets. Teruko stared as air *shimmered* over her head, flowing out the door like the draft off a volcano.

"Is that all right?"

Teruko dragged her gaze back to the prince. The very quiet, earnest prince, who'd just pulled off a firebending move she'd never seen in her life. "Yes, sir," she managed. "Fine."

"I have not seen that form used in some time." Iroh stroked his beard thoughtfully. "You have been in the scrolls when I was not looking?"

"...I guess," Prince Zuko muttered, glancing aside. "Should have used *that* on Azula's firestorm. I guess I just didn't remember it." He eyed Teruko again. "You're not moving, are you?"

"With all due respect, sir? Not a chance," Teruko said dryly. "The last time you were out of the captain's sight, the ship blew, and the captain thought you went with it. That's *not* going to happen on my watch. Sir."

"Good luck," the prince sighed. Inclined his head to her in respect, before turning back to his uncle. And switched to flawless High Court. "Uncle. About what happened at the palace... I know I disappointed you-"

Iroh held up an imperious hand. "When I saw you fall, I looked forward to this moment," he said dryly. "It gave me hope, to consider in the most delicate detail how I would tell you of your foolishness, your rashness, and your recklessness. Will you now convince me I was mistaken?"

Ooo. Teruko tried not to wince, remembering her own training sergeant's scathing lectures. So *that* was the legendary Dragon of the West. *Kid, you are so in for it.*

"No, Uncle," the prince said quietly. "The situation was... I have no excuse. If Azula had killed me, or I'd killed her - our people wouldn't like it, but it's happened before. They'd *understand*. But if

Azula killed the Avatar, the world and the spirits would rise against us - and the next Avatar would most likely be born in the Northern Water Tribe. We've already seen what the Ocean was willing to do there with an Avatar involved. And if the Avatar killed Azula, the Fire Lord's current legitimate heir, destroying the line *Avatar Kyoshi herself* ordered our nation to give loyalty to..." He swallowed.

Teruko gulped herself, and hoped the pair of princes thought it was just the tea. They *knew* she was listening. Every Fire Nation officer had to master High Court for secure communications, noble-born or not. They wouldn't be even talking if they didn't mind her overhearing.

Right now, she was almost wishing they did. The Avatar, destroy the linchpin of loyalty for the *entire Fire Nation*? That was... that'd be...

"The war wouldn't stop, Uncle," Prince Zuko said, echoing her terrified thoughts. "We'd have *nothing* left to lose. I couldn't... I couldn't think of a better plan. I tried."

"Nor could I," Iroh said softly.

The prince's eyes widened. "Uncle?"

"You had no resources," Iroh said quietly. "No one else to call on, with the power to face Azula, or the Avatar. No one, who could hope to get there in time. You sent word to me, which was wise - but if you had not cleared Ty Lee from the field, I myself might have been in difficulty. *I have not practiced to dodge chi blocks.*" He sighed. "Your duty to our people is to live, yes. But for the survival of our nation, at *that* moment, you made the best possible choice." He smiled. "I am proud of you, nephew. Well done."

The prince brightened, and Teruko glanced hastily away. She'd seen that look before, and it didn't belong on a prince. *Captain, we need to talk.*

The guards murmured a warning, and Teruko stood, prepared to give her charges time to compose themselves. But they were already on their feet; Iroh's expression as polite as Prince Zuko's was wary.

"Good morning." Captain Jee paused in the opening, casting her a quick glance. *Trouble?* That arched eyebrow seemed to say.

She tried not to roll her eyes. *Oh, just a little.*

"Prince Zuko," the captain nodded, stepping inside. "I'm glad to see you're alive."

"We tried to find out if you were," the prince said plainly. "But then we had to make a... strategic retreat." A wry smile touched his face. "You got promoted. Congratulations."

"And you managed to get assassinated," Jee said, just as wry. "Or so the admiral said. I suppose he failed to consider that if you were stealthy enough to make it into Pohuai Stronghold, you were probably sneaky enough to make it off the ship before someone could blow it up."

He thinks the admiral-? Teruko thought, aghast. *Wait a second, what'd he say about Pohuai Stronghold...*

"You knew about that?" The prince looked like he wanted the earth to open up and swallow him.

"Your uncle and I had a *discussion* about the good ropes going missing from the ship's supply," Jee said dryly. "How on earth did you manage to get past firebending guards without giving anything

away?"

"...A bucket."

Iroh stifled a snicker.

They're seriously talking about- "You broke into *Pohuai Stronghold*?" Teruko choked out. "With a *bucket*?"

"There was a good reason?" Prince Zuko tried to look innocent. And failed. Miserably. "I didn't bring the bucket in *with* me..."

"Don't let him fool you," Jee advised her. "Since I've known him, the prince has managed to survive clashing with the Avatar-"

"He's a *monk*," the prince grumbled. "He'd probably only kill me by accident."

"Rescued the general from the Earth Kingdom Army-"

"There were only five of them, for Agni's sake!"

"Ran a Fire Navy blockade..."

"I was an *idiot*."

"A desperate one," Iroh agreed cheerfully.

Agni, Teruko almost groaned. Not a pampered noble youngster. A too-young recruit, with enough rank to get him into trouble and barely enough luck to scrape by out of it. *Captain? When I get out of this duty, I'm going to hurt you.*

"And I can't imagine what he's been up to since the pirates missed blowing him up," Jee finished.

"...They didn't miss."

The captain straightened, sober. "What happened?"

The young man shrugged, and the hairs on the back of Teruko's neck went up. No one that young should be that matter-of-fact about almost getting killed. "Heard a noise, went up to the bridge, saw their lizard-bird - saw the blast coming, and wrapped the fire around me. Ended up in the harbor." He swallowed. "Uncle Iroh found me at the tide-line."

"You would have made it," Iroh said firmly. Looked soberly at the captain. "As Admiral Zhao wished so much for my nephew to perish, we allowed him his illusions of success. I went as an adviser, and my nephew snuck onto the Admiral's ship as a common firebender. Once we reached the North Pole, the prince left the ship by night, followed turtle-seals through the ice into the city-"

He what? Teruko thought, stunned. A firebender in cold water was in trouble. Swimming in polar ice? The prince should be *dead*.

"-Found the Avatar, defeated Katara to take him, and made quite some distance before the Avatar's allies caught them... and Zhao attacked the Moon Spirit's vulnerable form." He bowed his head. "Princess Yue of the Northern Water Tribe should be recorded in the annals of heroes. She gave her life, for the Moon's sake."

And that was a thought that made Teruko uncomfortable even thinking it. A Water Tribe woman

was the only reason the moon was still in place, balancing the sun and ocean? It made her feel... small.

"If you'd said it was anyone else, I wouldn't believe you," the captain admitted. "But Zhao... spirits, what was he thinking?"

"That history would record him as the conqueror of the North Pole, and the Moon's slayer," Iroh said grimly. "It is not wise to trifle with spirits. Glory is poor comfort for widows and widowers who have only watery graves for their memorials."

Jee's eyes narrowed. "You didn't let him get away."

"He did not get far," the retired general admitted. "My nephew caught him."

"We fought," Prince Zuko said quietly. "Then... the Ocean Spirit took him." Gold eyes looked haunted. "I couldn't help him."

"The distraction of the retreat covered our escape, and we spent three weeks drifting to shore," Iroh picked up the thread. "Unfortunately, Princess Azula then found us."

"She said Father wanted me home," the prince whispered. "I fell for it." He shook his head, pained. "I can't *believe* I fell for it, Azula *always* lies..."

"Unless the truth is worse," Iroh sighed. "That is when we learned my brother wished us both brought back as prisoners. Myself for acting against Zhao... and Zuko, for failing to catch *and hold* the Avatar." His eyes narrowed. "Which, I merely wish to mention, even Admiral Zhao, with a fleet at his command, could not do."

The captain looked gray. "But - for the prince to return, without his banishment lifted-"

Iroh inclined his head, as the prince looked away.

Death, Teruko knew, trying not to shiver. Or yield to the burning anger that always simmered under the surface. *He's just a kid.*

Old enough for an Agni Kai, sure. Old enough to be recruited, if just barely. But... to ask the prince to die, just because he couldn't stop the bridge to the spirit world? Not fair. Not fair at all.

Not just not fair, some of the political sense her instructors had tried to pound in pointed out. *Downright stupid. Maybe he's an exile, maybe he's not as good as Princess Azula-*

And given what she'd seen Prince Zuko pull off, how scary was his sister?

-But he's Sozin's line. Anybody who's served with him might... still be loyal....

The captain. Censored letters. The *Dragon of the West*, obviously attached enough to the prince to stay with him through three years of exile. She didn't have all the pieces yet, but the picture wasn't looking good.

"We were dealing with the royal escort," Iroh went on, "and Prince Zuko was... er...."

"Getting kicked all over the deck by Azula," the prince admitted grimly. "At least it got her talking."

"You could think of it as a compliment," Iroh said dryly. "She thought enough of your tenacity to choose to strike you down, rather than try to bring you back in chains alive."

"She probably just wanted to show off," the prince said darkly. "Oh, look! I can shoot lightning out of my fingertips, just like Dad." Fingers curled into fists; he breathed, obviously wrestling down his temper. "Uncle blocked her, and we ran." He met the captain's gaze squarely. "We cut our topknots, and we ran."

Teruko didn't bother to hide her shiver. To disagree with your clan, and cast yourselves upon the waves.... It was the last resort, for a great name.

No. Not the last. The last is taking your loyalty back. Even if it kills you.

Only it hadn't killed the prince. Spirits, what a mess.

"And now we come to a bit of deception on my part," Iroh admitted. "I was unable to shape it myself, but I have known the healing fire exists for almost seventeen years." He regarded his nephew. "You *were* lucky to be born. Never doubt that."

The prince swallowed dryly, and Teruko hid a sudden frown. Temper, difficult birth, those eyes....

Royal, remember? He's probably never even heard of Byakko.

Which was just the way her relatives liked it. Byakko might be odd and old-fashioned in a thousand different ways, but it didn't make trouble. Byakko was a nice, quiet, friendly place, of pleasant breezes over teosinte-buckwheat fields, hot forges for water-marked steel, and stone guardian walls to keep Mount Shirotora's ice-slides out of the orchards below. Byakko did their duty, sending people and supplies to the war and deeply glad for every child who lived to come back. Byakko kept to itself, thank you, and prayed that someday the war would be over.

And if some people who just happened to look like those on Azulon's list ended up scattered in little villages away from the harbor... well, that was nobody's business but Lady Kotone's. If there were a few spiritual people up the mountain taking care of shrines, that was tradition, older than Lord Kuzon and Lady Ran, and who'd argue with tradition? And if even stranger people turned up from time to time, and settled down - that was Shidan's business. And nobody in their right mind would cross *him*.

"Through perseverance and some luck, Prince Zuko discovered how one could guide the fire from merely helping to true healing," Iroh went on. "We had some interesting adventures, which I will tell you of at a later time... I fear we have continued the family habit of burning things down to gain a strategic advantage when pressed...."

"Azula was in that building after the Avatar," Prince Zuko said bluntly. "Fighting her on a deck was bad. Inside walls? I'm not suicidal." He looked at the captain. "I know. A loyal citizen, even an exile, should have helped her capture the Avatar. I *know*. But she told me the Fire Lord didn't want the Avatar captured anymore. That she was going to kill him." He shook his head. "We couldn't let that happen. We fought, we had her cornered... she shot Uncle with a fireblast. It was - bad."

"Katara helped Prince Zuko heal me, and my nephew repaid the debt by warning the Avatar's allies of Princess Azula," Iroh said plainly. "A warning they seem not to have heeded.... We had quite a few more adventures, and then we managed to slip inside Ba Sing Se as refugees, where unexpected aid helped us hide."

"Hide?" Captain Jee drew back in disbelief. "You're *firebenders*. How could you hide-" He started to gesture toward his own eyes, and froze.

Stunned, Teruko studied the general. She hadn't looked, she'd just assumed...

Green. No firebender should have green eyes!

"A waterbending technique," Iroh answered their shock. "There is a person of great courage in Ba Sing Se, whom I very much hope you will meet. Great courage... and great forgiveness, to aid those fleeing from war. Many of whom were *ordered* to flee, rather than allow themselves to be sacrificed for no reason but Azulon's suspicion." He let out a slow breath. "Unfortunately for all of us, the technique touches the spirit as well as the body. And the Moon... knows us. It seems she chose to..." Iroh sighed. "Captain. Whatever your personal feelings on what we must tell you, I beg you to think of your people. If you wish to aid us no further, at least let us deceive Hakoda's fleet into believing you still do, long enough for us to cover your retreat."

"Why do I get the feeling this is worse than running Zhao's blockade?" Captain Jee muttered.

"Because it is," Prince Zuko said quietly. Drew a hand through air again, something shimmering around his fingertips...

Teruko saw water flow down his fingers into a globe in his palm, and backed up until she hit bent sandstone. "Agni!"

"Agni's sister." Fearless, Iroh put a hand on the prince's shoulder. "The spirits are moving, Captain Jee. My brother has no heir but Azula now. Even if we win this war... we have lost."

Princess Azula's the heir. Teruko's heart beat like a trapped bird. She'd believed the princess was of the blood of heroes, but given the prince's proof... *Oh Agni. No.*

White-faced, the captain nodded. "My prince... I'm sorry. I know you tried."

"*Tried* wasn't good enough," Zuko said bleakly. Water froze hard in his grasp... then melted away as he sighed, wisping into steam. "But there is something we can salvage out of this, Captain. If the spirits are bent on wrecking the succession, if the *spirits* want us to tear ourselves apart in a civil war and let the other nations pick the bones - damn it, Avatar Kyoshi's decree can freeze and die!"

The captain looked as though someone had dropped ice down his spine. "Destroy the authority of the Dragon Throne? That's-"

"The only way some of our people will survive." Iroh's voice was iron. "If the great names defend their own domains, if some of them defy Azula, so the Avatar has no excuse to stand aside and let his allies destroy them - some of our people will live."

"I know it's treason," Zuko said hoarsely. "I *know*. And I know I'm already a traitor. So I will do this, for our people. I will establish a settlement - a *domain* - outside the Fire Lord's authority. I will *challenge* that authority, as a great name. I will *make this work*." He was trembling; fear and anger and hope clear as the sparks flickering off his fingers. "If one great name can do it, the others will know it's possible. The Avatar - the Avatar and his allies are planning to kill the Fire Lord. If they do, if Azula is the Fire Sages' only choice as heir... All the great names have to do is refuse to confirm their loyalty." Anger melted into grief, and awful mourning. "It's going to be horrible. So many of our people are going to die..."

"But not all of them," Iroh said firmly. "With Agni's blessing - *not* all of them." He swept that odd green gaze over them both. "We will do this, with your aid or without. We will rescue innocent civilians - *Fire Nation* civilians - from Azula's grasp on Ba Sing Se. We will bring them to the place my nephew and I have chosen, and those of the Earth Kingdom who wish to come, and we

will at one stroke both damage the Ministry of War and secure the best chance for restoring airbenders to the world. We will make it clear to my brother that he has a *choice*. Retreat to the Fire Nation, and live - or continue the war, and die."

Captain Jee shook himself, like a man stepping out of snow. "You know he won't retreat, General."

"That," Iroh's voice was cold steel, "is no longer my problem."

Teruko swallowed hard. This was the man Fire Lord Azulon had passed over as heir. Spirits, *why?*

Iroh weighed them in his gaze, and inclined his head. "Do not decide now. Think on it. Tell us when you are ready."

"There are many things to decide," Jee acknowledged quietly. "But one is not a decision at all." He bowed to Zuko, hands in the Flame. "My prince. You are still my commander. Nothing will change that."

"But - you - I didn't-" The prince gulped, mustering scattered wits. "Why?"

"Because you were right." Jee straightened, face sober; barely a hint of rueful amusement in his eyes. "You were reckless, rude, and about as warm to the men as a frost-nipped komodo-rhino, but you were *right*. It was worth our lives to pursue the Avatar. *All* of our lives. Including yours." A smile bent his mustache. "You never sent us into danger, Prince Zuko. You *led* us there. I've been in this navy over thirty years, and I can tell you... if you find a commander like that, it doesn't matter if you *like* him."

The prince's lone brow had climbed almost to his hair. "That's why you were on my ship," he muttered.

"Excessive honesty," Iroh chuckled. "I have always believed an officer is far better served by that, than the other extreme."

"If it's honesty you want, General... he's too young for this." Jee turned a sober look on the prince. "You are, you know that. Our people are used to following mature leaders. You're young, you've got a temper that can melt steel, and this is going to be a bloody, awful, inglorious mess. Spirits, it's going to be worse than Nara..." He looked away. "I'm sorry, General. Of course, you were at Nara."

"We have seen your wife Ayame's name inscribed on the list of Home Guards lost," the general said compassionately. "She was brave... and even so, I well know you and your children wish she had been a bit less brave, and still *here*."

"You have to go out," the captain said quietly. "You don't have to come back." He blinked, surfacing from memory. "We?"

"Father put me in Uncle Iroh's care the day he returned from the Earth Kingdom," Prince Zuko said simply. "I've traveled with him for years. I was there. I remember. And I know this is going to be worse." He swallowed dryly. "We're out of time, Captain. Someone has to do this. And - we're it."

Captain Jee nodded slowly. "How many people do you need to get out of the city?"

"Over three thousand, of the Fire Nation," Iroh answered. "We are still unsure how many Earth Kingdom citizens will wish to come."

"Over-" The captain groaned. "Of course. Why would you ever think small... I don't have to remind

you Princess Azula is still in that city?"

"Of course," the prince smirked. "It'd be *crazy* to go back there."

Jee started to speak. Stopped. Gave the prince a narrow-eyed look that somehow made Teruko want to giggle. "So it would." He glanced at the general.

Smiling, Iroh ticked off names on his fingers. "Pohuai Stronghold. The North Pole. Dai Li headquarters." Another smile. "It can be done."

"We're going to need some planning sessions," the captain muttered. Bowed again. "I need to lay some groundwork with my men. Lieutenant, if you'll come with me for a few minutes?"

"Yes, sir." Teruko tried not to step on his heels. She was still caught between giggling and wanting to pound her head against something hard, heavy, and immovable. Preferably, until she passed out. *The prince is a waterbender. The spirits... our prince is a waterbender. And a firebender.*

La? Agni? I know family's supposed to share. But this is kind of out of hand.

"You handled that very... diplomatically, Lieutenant."

Teruko eyed the Water Tribe warriors trying *not* to look like they were listening to every unintelligible word. Smirked at them, and followed the captain on a walk around the shelter's guarded perimeter. "Sir, just because I have a temper, doesn't mean I'm going to take it out on a hurt youngster."

"Oh?" Her captain's tone was curious. "Even given the... obvious interference? Some might well consider it... tainting. Even without the option the general has discussed."

"I suppose a lot of people would, sir. But... well, back in Byakko? We've had people come in from the colonies before. I've seen a lot of mixed-up kids. Not *that* mixed up, but damn if he doesn't remind me of-" *Careful, Teruko, keep your mouth shut.* "-people I know."

"That's right," Jee mused. "Sometimes I forget you're from Lady Ursa's home domain-"

Teruko grabbed his shoulder, armor and all. "Lady Ursa?" she demanded. "*Our* Lady Ursa? He's *Shidan's* grandkid?"

Jee eyed her hand until she let it drop. "You didn't know?"

Teruko shook her head, heart racing. "Lord Kuzon and Lady Ran... I was, spirits, nine? All I knew was, our domain was - was making a great sacrifice for the Fire Nation. And the Lady Ursa was leaving. Wasn't even a year later we were mourning Lord Kuzon's death. I thought I heard something about Lady Ursa having a heir, but nobody believed it. Who'd keep a grandkid away from Shidan? That'd be like telling Lieutenant Sadao to go play near the blasting jelly..." She paled, implications crashing down like lava. "Princess Azula's a... oh, *monkey-feathers*."

"Princess Azula is-?" Jee prompted, brow arched.

Teruko tried not to sweat. "Sir. Um, we don't talk about this, outside Byakko-"

"Lieutenant. Tactical information. *Now*."

"Well... people say... Shidan *appeared*. In a sun-shower." She let a heartbeat pass. "But they teach you in school that's just a legend. Sir."

Jee stared at her a long moment. "I'm... going back to the ship." He rubbed at what must be a throbbing headache. "Just... try to keep them alive."

Ride herd on a *dragon-child*. Oh, sure. And for her next trick, she'd swim a moat of ice. "I'll do my best." Teruko shook her head. "But with all due respect, sir? Somebody's father really *screwed up*."

And now we've got to pick up the pieces, Teruko thought, exchanging bows with her captain before she headed back to her charges. *Damn it, Agni, why'd you let La stick her hand in like that? That kid may be young, and in over his head, but he was the best chance for a Fire Lord we had...*

Unless that wasn't what Agni wanted.

Bring down the Dragon Throne. Break us back into domains again, the great names fighting and allying as they see fit.

If it worked, a lot of people would die.

But Byakko would survive. Taking up her post outside the shelter, Teruko nodded to herself. *A lot of us would make it.*

Cold comfort to the widows and widowers of the Siege of the North. But it would be *life*. And life was precious. Always.

Agni gives us life, and breath, and the fire to never give up. He never says it's going to be easy. Teruko let out a quiet breath. *I'm with you, Captain. I don't know how we're going to do this... but lead on.*

And if this worked, if Sozin's decrees were cast down... then maybe, just maybe, her children would see dragons fly.

Chapter End Notes

Given Zuko's usual paranoia, I imagine the first thing he thought on seeing just one teenager to guard a village hosting the Avatar was, "trap". Obviously, Sokka was a decoy to get him into position for someone (or several someones) much, much more dangerous. And given Zuko's experience with Li and Lo - yes, Gran-Gran does look like a viable threat.

And in a sense, she may have been much more damaging than anyone realized. According to "The Puppetmaster", Hama's best friend was Kanna. And Hama's idea of proper behavior (admittedly, after breaking out of years of abuse in a Fire Nation prison) is to use her waterbending to torture, and - it's implied, at least - murder innocent Fire Nation civilians. So, if she thinks that's okay... what are the odds Kanna shares some of that attitude? Especially toward the people who took away every waterbender in her adoptive tribe, and murdered her daughter-in-law? Put that together with what Gran-Gran says in the second episode, which ties Katara bringing her hope to her being a waterbender and destined to help the Avatar, not because of Katara herself... Houston, we have a problem.

About Azula and Zuko... recall, Meixiang said that some of the Fire Nation's greatest heroes and blackest villains came from dragon-blood. They're extraordinary people.

One way or another.

And if you suppose that, the custom of the Agni Kai makes a lot more sense. Let me reference a bit of Texas history here... at one point, it was somewhat settled but beyond the reach of ordinary U.S. law, making it a popular destination for bandits, murderers, and villains of all kinds. In recognition of this, there used to be a law to the effect of "he needed killin'". As in, if you killed a man, and a jury of your peers agreed he needed to die, you were off.

Unfortunately, a system like that only works if you have other equals to judge you; in this case, other firebenders, or other great names. As soon as Kyoshi centralized authority under one Fire Lord, that "weeding out" of more sadistic types ground to a halt. The effects might not have been noticeable right away, but given a century or two... and then, they got Sozin. Hello, Law of Unintended Consequences.

Yes, Kyoshi had a reason for what she did. The Gaang will find it out later.

For those wondering... thwapping the Knowledge Spirit with a book definitely counts as fighting spirits!

"You have to go out; you don't have to come back." - Unofficial Coast Guard motto. A large part of the job is rescue; you go out knowing you'll risk your life to do it, and there are no promises you'll make it home.

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Okay, writer slip-up; I never meant to imply that Kuzon's wife was a dragon. I ran across "Ran" as a Japanese name that implied tumult, upheaval, and rebellion, and thought that'd be perfect for the background of Byakko. "Ran and Shao" slipped my mind completely. To be perfectly clear, Lady Ran was not a dragon, but a human firebender. Thanks to all the reviewers who pointed that out!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was dark and scary and *lonely*... but at least it didn't hurt here. And the last thing he remembered was hurting. A lot.

Wake up, Aang.

Not words. A feeling, like Shidan had sometimes filtered into this head with the touch of a feeler; like Fang had, even as a spirit. Feelings, and images: Himself, pale and still on Water Tribe furs. Toph with a hand on his pulse. Sokka murmuring serious words he couldn't hear.

Wake up. Hands wanting to prop him up. Cups of cool water, and a steaming waft of seaweed-touched broth, flavored with *would-be, will-be-*

But thirst and hunger were part of the pain back there - and he didn't need them, he needed blue eyes and kind hands and a smile just for him...

Spirit-damned stubborn airbender strangle dig dig find-

Something was clawing through the darkness. Coming for him. He needed help. Needed-

"It's all right, Aang," Roku's voice echoed through the darkness. "I'll handle this."

Standing on her mountaintop in the spirit world, Avatar Yangchen watched the earthly scene play out, and shook her head. The rest of the children had scattered out of the tent as Roku swirled out of the mist that had been Aang, but one angry young firebender stood his ground. *This isn't going to go well.*

"You!" Prince Zuko snapped in High Court, jabbing a finger Roku's direction. "Get back where you came from! No one's going to hurt Aang. There's no temple to bring down on our heads. Aang needs healing, which means I need his body *here*, which means *you* need to be gone. Go!"

Yangchen almost collapsed in giggles.

"Now, that's the spirit." Another young firebender sat down beside her, watching through the same shimmering mist. "Have to admit, I was worried when Yue grabbed him. He's a tough kid, but..."

"He'll do fine as a yāorén," Yangchen said firmly. "You did, Kaze."

"Yeah, but that was lifetimes ago." Lu Ten grinned wryly at her. "Should I feel sorry for Roku?"

"Yes, you should," she nodded. "Poor man. No yāorén to help him... and even with Fang, he never truly knew dragons..." Words caught her attention, and she winced. "Oh dear. Did Roku just-?"

"Yeah, I think he did. Cover your ears."

Even under her palms, Zuko's roar was clear. "*I am not my great-grandfather!*"

"Ooo." Lu Ten stroked score points in midair. "Zinged. *Three* times."

"Shh," Yangchen murmured. "I suspect we need to hear this."

"You are the heir to Sozin's legacy," Roku said sternly. "War. Hatred. Murder. The world hates and fears the Fire Nation, and its destruction will be on your head. You think my successor young and foolish? Ready to allow others' hates to flourish, and rage unchecked? Who spawned that hate, boy? Who shattered all the world Aang knew? Sozin led you all to murder; it was your choice to follow, or refuse-

"And die!" Zuko snarled back. "Agni! Are you a firebender or not? Though I guess *not*, Uncle said Avatars aren't bound by loyalty... People *did* refuse, you bastard! People *died* refusing! Uncle Kuroyama died! And Father, and Mother... I couldn't save them! I barely saved Ran!" Angry tears glittered in pale gold. "Avatar Kyoshi forced the great names to bind themselves to the Fire Lord. Disloyalty is *death!*"

"Kuzon?" Lu Ten murmured. Gave Yangchen a look askance. "You cheated!"

"Perhaps a little," the nun smiled. "Azula granted us a storm. It seemed a pity to let the chance pass unused." Gray eyes were sober, reflecting on the needs of the spirits, and frail, too frail mortal flesh. "Aang may fail. Aang may succeed, and yet still perish before he can find and train any born of air. Zuko? With all the odds against him, he *survives*."

"He's fire and water," Lu Ten reminded her. "Not fire and air."

As Kaze had been, once. Yangchen nodded. "Bender or not, he yet *knows* air." She moved her fingers in a silent prayer. "It may be enough."

"Fear of execution," Roku was saying.

"You really don't get it." Zuko's shoulders slumped. "I betrayed the Fire Lord. It almost killed me. No death sentence. No *execution*. Fire is *loyalty* - and when you break it, your fire goes *out*." He swallowed, and looked Roku in the eye. "What the Fire Nation did, what Sozin led us to do, is horrible. Some of us should suffer. I've seen what some of our armies have done. But if you and your *four nations have to stay separate* says a kid like Jinhai has to die to *make up* for what his ancestors did - damn you! I'm *not Sozin!* I'm going to fix this!"

"Really?" Roku drew himself up, arrogant as any firebender born. "How?"

The gesture Zuko made left Yangchen gaping, and Lu Ten clapped his hands over his eyes in disbelief. "Oh, Agni," Lu Ten groaned. "He's gonna *die*."

"Not today," Yangchen said firmly, reaching out to where Roku was already summoning a fireball. *We need him, my friend.*

We do not need an arrogant, crude, insolent child of Sozin's! crackled back to her.

And of yours, Yangchen pointed out. *Which is fitting; the guilt rests on you both, does it not? Both your actions led to this war.* She reached out to the firebender. *Perhaps a less involved view would serve Aang better.*

Perhaps...

The mortal world pulled, and she breathed with borrowed lungs.

Zuko blinked at her. Set his jaw, and braced for impact.

Yangchen regarded him mildly. "You don't truly think you would survive if I meant you ill, do you, young one?"

Pale gold didn't flinch. "I'd try."

"You do remind me of Kaze," Yangchen mused, sitting down on Aang's bed. "This far, and no further." She held out her hand. "Come. I have much to tell you, and no time."

"Me?" Wary, Zuko sat, politely away from her skirts. "Shouldn't you tell someone Aang trusts?"

Yangchen laughed softly. "I doubt you want them to know what you are, young yāorén."

The prince froze.

"Peace, young friend," Yangchen said calmly. "Yes, you are meant to give Aang aid, and advice. But however deeply you have been touched by the spirits, you are still human. No one can *demand* your aid." She smiled faintly. "Kaze was born of fire, and gifted with air, and my dearest friend. He was with me to the end. They all were." She looked down, saddened. "Perhaps it would have been better for the world if they were not such brave friends. If Kuruk had had others to aid him... if Kyoshi had had those of earth and fire to bridge the gap and know your people... so much would have been different."

"I'm sorry," Zuko whispered. "I am so sorry, Lady Yangchen."

"The guilt is Sozin and Roku's, not yours," Yangchen said steadily. "But Roku was not wholly wrong. You are prince of the Fire Nation, and of Sozin's line, and the fate that will now befall the world is your *responsibility*." Gray eyes were level as a blade. "Knowing that, and I believe you *do* know that, young prince... what will you do?"

"I can't bring back the Air Nomads. They're gone." His tone was even, practical. Barely flecked with grief, like fire-glints on steel. "But there are still people in the world who love the wind. There are still scrolls, left by Avatar Kyoshi with the Dai Li." Knuckles whitened against his robe. "Even if it works - they won't be your people. I *know* that. I'm not a spirit. I'm not even really a prince anymore. But I am a great name of the Fire Nation, and if hard work and courage can put right *any* of what Sozin destroyed... I'm going to build a place of freedom. And hope."

"Firebenders, teaching airbending?" Yangchen arched a delicate brow.

"If you have any better ideas, I'm listening," Zuko shot back. "If Aang makes it - and that's an *if*, I know my father - he's *one kid*. A child, who made master before he was twelve. Who knows airbending like he breathes! How is he going to teach anyone the basics? How is he going to deal with teaching people who *can't* pick up bending in a week? With having to *look* for people who can bend in the first place? All the Air Nomads were benders. We don't have that! We're going to be looking, and listening, and praying... spirits, I don't even know who looks after you!"

No, you wouldn't, would you? Even though Gyatso considered you a true friend, he would have waited until you were a master yourself. "We are children of the mountains, and the Eternal Blue Sky," Yangchen stated. "Should you succeed, they will find the names." She regarded the young man before her, already feeling her hold on this world weaken. "For all her flaws, Kyoshi almost found the answer. If only she had crafted for herself what she gave the Earth King-

The world shimmered.

"Call your fires," Yangchen ordered, turning so he could access the wounded chakra. "Draw off the poisoned chi-

And forgive me.

The world shattered into fire.

"Let me in there, Sokka!" Toph said impatiently, blind eyes glaring through him as he stood between her and Aang's tent. "Nothing's happening! I'd know."

"No disrespect to the feet, but Roku's *dead*," Sokka pointed out. "Might put a crimp in your bad-guys-want-to-fry-me sense. You've never seen - I mean, you've never been around Aang when he's... not Aang. It's *spooky*. And things tend to go boom. Last time I saw Roku? Whole island, bam! One big volcano. So, could we wait a little? Until spooky dead Avatar either fries the angry jerk, or goes away?"

"If you think I'm letting Aang fry Sparky when Zuko's trying to *help* him - come on! Nothing's-

The world exploded.

Sokka spat out a mouthful of sand, ears still ringing as Toph wriggled out from under him. The earth wasn't moving. What was left of Aang's tent on this side was a few fiery shreds, flickering into ashes. And he could have sworn he'd felt a massive ball of fire swoosh overhead, ending up just about...

Zuko wobbled to his knees, sand blackened under him. "...Ow."

Tent. Fireball. Zuko. Sokka added up burn patterns and trajectory, and gaped. "How did - why did - you can do that with fire? Just make it like an air-blast, so something doesn't flatten you-"

A bleeding hand gripped his tunic, and gold eyes bore into his, narrowed and furious. "This," Zuko hissed, low and deadly, "was *not* part of my orders. Find the Avatar. Capture the Avatar. *The*. Implies *one*. One Avatar! One very alive, crazy airbending child of an Avatar! Not dead Avatars who show up and lecture you for things you never even did!"

"Okay, you've kind of got a point," Sokka managed, trying to pry loose hot fingers. And getting exactly nowhere. "Toph, a little help here?"

No Toph. Out of the corner of his eye Sokka glimpsed green herding Katara away from them and in to check on Aang. Good idea. Probably. But he was feeling just a little outnumbered here.

"I did not sign up to chase Roku!" Zuko was snarling. "Roku's dead! He's been dead a *hundred and twelve years*! It's not right for him to be showing up like that! It's not decent! Ancestor spirits are supposed to show up in dreams! Or at family shrines! Though I pity any family that has *that* arrogant, self-righteous, smug know-it-all in their family tree! Ghosts aren't supposed to walk in

broad daylight, damn it!"

Technically, Sokka would say they shouldn't walk at all. But *shouldn't* and *spirits* seemed to get tangled up around Aang, so even a guy who wanted nothing more than seal-hunts and boomerangs had to learn to roll with it... and could Zuko maybe let his feet touch the ground?

"And it's not enough that Roku shows up! No; I get an *airbending nun*! Do I look like a girl? Aang's got wounds on his back, where I need to get to them - it's not *decent* for me to ask a lady to disrobe without a chaperone! It's not civilized! How could he do that to me?"

Sokka saw Bato and a few of the men twitching... and Teruko and a few of the other soldiers ready to twitch back. *No*, he mouthed. 'Cause honestly, this wasn't fun - but it was just yelling. He'd seen Zuko fight. The firebender was focused, deadly, and usually *quiet*.

Crazy as it sounded, a yelling Zuko might actually be a safe one.

"If Kyoshi shows up, *I quit*! I'm not doing this anymore! You hear that, Aang? Yangchen is bad enough! You want an earthbender to chew me out, wake up and tell Toph to do it!"

Weird. Was it Sokka's imagination, or had every firebender in sight *twitched* when Zuko said Kyoshi?

"And when I do get at what Yangchen asked me to heal-" Zuko let go, waving unsteadily at the charred tent. "*Oops*? What kind of Avatar goes *oops*?"

"Besides Aang?" Sokka snorted. Blinked, and re-ran exactly what Zuko had said through his mind. "Oh, man. It's not just Aang?"

"Avatars are crazy! Spirits are crazy!" Zuko was definitely weaving now, gritting his teeth to stay standing. "Before I found all of you, I'd never even *seen* a spirit! Now I can't go a week without tripping over one! Whose bright idea was *that*? Ocean spirits and plague spirits and man-eating seahorse-dragons and Guard-strangling umbrellas and moon spirits that drown you to do you a *favor*... I didn't ask for this!"

"Me neither," Sokka muttered, feeling a weird kind of sympathy for the angry jerk. Before Aang, he'd barely seen benders; just Katara, and the odd Fire Nation raid. He'd certainly never lived with people who took bending for granted. The North Pole, the whole Earth Kingdom - they were *different*, in a way that kind of scared him sometimes. The way people like Jet tried to use Katara because she had power, the way Aang threw himself off cliffs with a smile, the way earthbenders made solid ground - *not* solid. Even little things Toph and Aang did, like slide him sideways because it was the easiest way to get him out of their way, or swamp him with water, or blow-dry things when he'd really just rather sit by a fire, thanks. And... not so little things, like not counting him in a fight, when two out of three they were up against couldn't bend *either*.

It was just so bizarre, knowing Zuko felt the same way about anything...

Wait. Hold on. Backtrack. "You saw Yue?" Sokka demanded, gripping green cloth.

"...I shouldn't have said that," Zuko muttered.

"Was she okay?" Sokka tried for a glare, but suspected it came off about as intimidating as a saber-moose lion cub. Zuko *knew* glares.

"She was the *Moon*," Zuko said reluctantly. "Does *okay* even *fit*?"

Darn. He hated it when Zuko made sense.

Behind him, Teruko cleared her throat. Loudly.

Right. After all the time he'd spent making sure Dad knew to keep Katara away from Zuko, this probably didn't look good. Though just letting go because a Fire Navy marine told him to kind of grated-

"He woke up!" Katara beamed through the tatters of blue cloth. "Just for a minute, he's still out of it, but... he's going to be okay!" She dove back into the shadows.

"You're welcome!" Zuko snarled at the tent, brushing off Sokka's grip casually as he might a spider-fly. "Oh, what I wouldn't give to dump her in Basic..."

Teruko actually chuckled. "What, you want to give her a vacation? Nothing to do but slog through mud, get screamed at by drill sergeants, pounded on by sadists, and try not to fall asleep standing up?"

"Sounds nice," Zuko agreed wistfully.

Sokka blinked at them. Added up the amount of chaos, panic, and pain he'd gone through on a typical day running from bad guys. Fire Nation or otherwise.

...Come to think of it, that *did* sound nice.

"Yeah, they don't let heirs get that lucky," Teruko sighed. "Come on, sir. Let's get that hand taken care of."

Shrugging at Bato, Sokka followed them.

Iroh was tending a fresh fire in front of Toph's shelter, coal throwing off waves of heat Sokka could feel yards away. "What happened?"

"Not sure yet." Zuko sank down by the flames, almost absently kneading fire in his left hand before pressing it over bleeding fingers. And reached out again, passing flame over himself; breathing markedly more even, as if he'd gotten a second wind. "Not the usual kind of lightning trauma."

"There's a usual kind?" Sokka pounced.

A swarm of gold eyes stared back.

Huh. But Dad swears Iroh's were green this morning. Which they might have been yesterday, come to think. So... how had that changed? And why?

Act normal. If we know one thing about Zuko, it's that he expects attacks. "Look, I just want to know what Aang's in for," Sokka said bluntly. "Katara says he woke up. You should be happy. You don't look happy. How bad is it?"

"Bad," Zuko answered, just as blunt. "This wasn't regular lightning. Azula *aimed* it. She meant to kill him. She *did*." He frowned. "Normal lightning's bad enough. A lot of people die-"

"Kind of handled that already," Sokka said flippantly.

"-And a lot of people who don't, wish they did," Zuko said grimly.

"Okay," Sokka said after a moment. "Listening."

Zuko eyed him. Glanced away, almost chewing his lip. "You know everybody's got bits of all the elements in them, right?"

In point of fact, he hadn't. Sokka shrugged.

"A lot of benders don't know this, but my teacher tried to fix people the Dai Li had hurt, so... Our bodies have lightning in them, too. Very *tiny* lightning." Zuko waved a hand toward his head. "The brain is like... like a shadow of a lightning storm, all the time."

Sokka frowned. "So, if we're supposed to have lightning in us... why's Aang hurt?"

"Can you drink a whole sea?" Zuko said wryly.

Oh. *Ouch*.

"Your body's built to carry lightning, but it's like a field, with thin irrigation ditches," Zuko went on. "A lightning bolt sweeps through like a tsunami. Sometimes there's still a field left afterward - but what happens to the channels?"

Sokka winced, thinking of Gaipan. "They get filled in."

"Or torn up, or just - in really bad shape," Zuko said soberly. "That's Aang, right now. There's a burn on his back where the bolt went in, and on his foot where it blasted out, and Katara's been working on those. And she should. But that's the *obvious* damage. I'm trying to get at all those little channels, before they scar up." He waved at his own face. "This? This is *nothing*, compared to scars *inside your head*."

Sokka swallowed. "You could be putting me on."

Zuko smirked. "I'm a lousy liar."

"So...?" Sokka prompted, dreading the answer.

"He could go blind, or deaf, or both," Zuko said bluntly. "He could get amnesia. He could be paralyzed, or have seizures, or lose all the dexterity you need to bend in the first place. That's just some of the things you can *see*. The subtle trauma? That's what really scares me. People hit by lightning, if they're not healed... they lose their *concentration*." He ticked doom off on his fingers. "They can't remember things you tell them. They can't get at things they already *know*. They can't do a lot of things at once - and trust me, bending is doing a *lot* of things at once. They're distractible, irritable, angry, depressed... and we're talking about *Aang*. Who already had a problem with most of that, and who *blows people up* when he gets mad." Gold eyes narrowed, worried and angry at once. "I think I can fix him. I'm *trying*. But this... it's not as simple as healing Uncle Iroh was. Not even close- Hey!"

"Just hold still, sir," Teruko said matter-of-factly, faceplate set aside as she gripped Zuko's right hand and wielded a razor edge of glittering black. "You'd have a hard time trying to trim these yourself."

Sokka had to blink, watching the lieutenant set to work on nails that had been torn into the quick before Zuko had healed them. "Can't you use scissors, like normal people?" Gran-Gran guarded her own nail scissors like a starving raven-wolf - and having had to trim his own with a knife on the run, Sokka couldn't blame her.

Once again, he was a focus of gold stares, and Iroh's amused, tolerant smile. "Okay, this is something Fire Nation-y, right?"

"It wouldn't be proper to use steel on the prince," Teruko said neutrally. "Obsidian is the custom. Though in the field, any edged stone will do."

Sure someone was trying to pull his leg, Sokka eyed Zuko. Who just looked back, blandly, as if this weren't strange at all. "You guys are *weird*."

And because he just had to, Sokka gave the firebender a look askance. "And you just happened to know all this lightning stuff?"

"I assure you, there was no element of chance involved," Iroh said soberly. "We have known Azula was capable of lightning for some months. She attempted to take us prisoner... and when it seemed that would fail, she chose to try to take my nephew back dead." He *tisk*ed softly. "She may be a firebending prodigy, but she does not understand what it means to be a master. One never stops learning."

"You said it, Uncle."

Sokka jumped bolt upright, landing to look down at a grinning earthbender. "Would you not sneak up on people whose feet don't have ears? It gets you boomerangs in nasty places... Why are you smiling?" he fired at Teruko.

"It's nice to see somebody's daughter has some good habits," Teruko said bluntly. Batted her eyes, and adopted a frail falsetto. "Oh, I am a delicate Earth maiden, I must prevail upon some strong man to *save* me!" She let go of the prince's hand, storing black stone away. "Pathetic."

"They're not all like that," Zuko said quietly. "Some of them are strong, where it counts. They just don't have the tools to fight with."

Sokka looked at Teruko, and Toph, and remembered gleaming knives. "Whoa, hold on. You mean Mai and Ty Lee are *normal*?"

"They are highly skilled; Azula would not settle for less," Iroh said plainly. "But if by *normal* you mean do most of our people learn to defend themselves, then yes."

Sokka flung up his hands. "*Why?*"

"Ignorant peasant," someone started to mutter.

"Stop." Zuko's voice was cold. "You haven't seen the South Pole. It's not his fault he's never been in a library."

"Oh, yes he has," Toph smirked. "Almost got buried in it."

"Is it my fault Wan Shi Tong thought we were the bad guys?" Sokka said indignantly. Zuko was *defending* him? From another *firebender*? Why?

"You're the guy who lied to him," Toph pointed out.

"You lied to He Who Knows Ten Thousand Things?" Iroh looked as if he couldn't decide whether to shake Sokka's hand or slap him silly.

"Now? I'd guess it's ten thousand and one," Toph smirked. "You could hear that book hit all the

way outside."

"You *fought* a knowledge spirit?" Iroh studied Sokka narrowly.

"He was going to stuff my sister and add her to his collection of *specimens*... Why are you looking at me like that?" Sokka said warily. He'd seen a lot of expressions on Zuko's face since that first meeting at the South Pole. Mostly, angry ones. Horror, and what looked like grudging sympathy? That was new.

"Stay close to the Avatar," Zuko managed, still pale. "He's probably scaring most of the malicious spirits off. The small ones, anyway."

"Malicious spirits?" Sokka sputtered. "You're kidding." He looked at a bunch of neutral and wary faces, and listened to Toph's startled silence. "You're... not kidding?"

"It's well known in the fleets that General Iroh is... concerned about spirits," Teruko said carefully. "Respectfully, sir."

"It is known that I fear them, or so Zhao said," Iroh said dryly. "I believe you know what happened to him."

"Actually, sir? Yours is the first report any of us has heard on just what happened," Teruko offered. "Would you mind telling it again for my people? The firebenders with the Admiral said you defeated him, and no one saw him after that."

"I did," Zuko said quietly. "We were fighting. He admitted to hiring the pirates. Then the Ocean Spirit took him." He shuddered. "I hope he's dead."

Which was not, Sokka realized uneasily, *I hope he's dead* as in, *I don't want him trying to kill me again*. More like, *I can think of a thousand nasty things the Ocean Spirit could be doing to the guy that killed his wife, and I'd rather be dead*.

"I do not fear the spirits, Lieutenant," Iroh said plainly. "I respect them, as I would any armed opponent. Some are cruel. Some mean to be kind. Some are simply so different from us that without the Avatar, even the strongest bender has no hope of *not* offending them. Or of escape."

One of the still-masked firebenders stirred. "Sir. The Fire Lord's position on the Avatar-" He cut himself off.

"That boy is no enemy to our nation," Iroh said firmly. "He has *opposed* us, yes. He has caused great damage, and loss of life. But I do not think he wishes to be anyone's enemy." The gray-haired firebender let out a slow breath. "And I have hopes of persuading him that he need not be."

Sokka stiffened. No way was Aang *not* going to take on the Fire Lord-

Toph shifted her feet, and a rock poked him in the butt.

Okay. He could take a hint. But she'd better have a *really* good reason.

"So, why do girls get to fight?" Toph asked. "My dad never wanted me to."

"Your father likely never expected your children to face assassins in their very cradle," Iroh stated. "When you are the last defense for those you love, you learn."

"Oh, come on!" Sokka burst out. Waved a hand at Zuko. "Who's going to send assassins after the

Fire Lord's son?" He hesitated. "Besides Zhao. Right, never mind..."

"I wasn't born the *Fire Lord's son*," Zuko said coldly. "The Fire Lord was *Azulon*. I was just another prince. Insurance. Some people thought our family tree didn't need any extra branches."

Sokka tried not to stare. How could- that was- damn, he didn't know *what* to think.

"You mean, your mom..." Toph swallowed hard. "How? No, stupid question, we met Mai..."

"Actually, I've heard Lady Ursa was more of a swordswoman," Teruko spoke up. "But first of all? She was a firebender of Byakko. We may not look like much, but we've got punch when it counts." Flames crackled above her hand, just for an instant.

Zuko's mom learned to fight. It chilled Sokka, down to the bone. *If my mom had... if she'd...*

She'd been up against a *firebender*. Who could fight that?

I do. Mai and Ty Lee, they fight benders. They're Fire Nation. They never stop fighting.

"You knew my mother?" Zuko glanced at Teruko, startled.

"No, sir," Teruko shook her head. "I was too young before she left. But I do know your honorable grandparents." She smiled, and rubbed at the corner of her jaw, as if soothing an old bruise.

"Shidan makes sure he kicks every fledg- ah, youngster's butt before they sign up. And Lady Kotone? She's solid as Mount Shiroto." Teruko frowned, hunting through memory. "You've got some aunts, too. Mostly in the Home Guard and volcano-watchers. I haven't heard if any of them have finally kidnapped some unsuspecting guy and settled down yet."

"Husband-stealing?" Iroh looked delighted, and amused. "I have not seen that custom followed in some time. You may wish to watch your step in Byakko, nephew."

"Yeah, right," Zuko muttered. "Only if she's blind."

"*Husband* stealing?" Sokka yelped, before Toph could even start to smirk. Maybe he'd never heard of betrothal necklaces before they'd hit the North Pole, but everybody knew guys arranged with their bride's father to "steal" a wife... And why was Teruko grinning at him like that?

"You know," the marine said speculatively, "he's still a little on the scrawny side. But given his father, that should work out in a year or two. And his sister's a bender. So half his kids have a good chance."

"I am certain we have red cord," Iroh nodded. "Wine may be a bit trickier, Captain Jee usually reserves that for use as needed... but he is likely to make an exception." The retired general's grin was just as toothy.

Sokka gulped. "I've got a girlfriend I think my dad needs me for something I gotta go!"

And ran for it, muffled snickers and Toph's cackles pursuing him.

He fetched up against the comforting wood prow of a ship, heart still beating like after they'd gotten past the lake serpent. Spirits, he'd be safer with the serpent!

"Sokka?" Hakoda strode over to him, obviously worried.

"I'm okay," Sokka said quickly. "It's fine. Honest. Argh." He knocked his head against the hull a few times, trying to thump out Teruko's grin. "Crazy. She's- Fire Nation are crazy!"

"She?" Hakoda chuckled. "Sokka, *all* women are crazy." Losing the smile, Hakoda looked past him. "*Suzuran* is signaling us that they're putting someone ashore. I wonder why?"

Suzuran? So the ship had a name now. Like the enemy had faces, and stories, and what Sokka was pretty sure was *trying* to be a sense of humor. Even if it was a warped and twisted one. "Dad?" Sokka managed. "I'm confused."

Hakoda frowned at him, as if staring at a patch of snow that had resolved into a readable trail. "You might want to keep your distance from Zuko."

"What?" Sokka shook his head. "Look, you know someone's got to keep an eye on him so Katara doesn't worry-"

"Your sister might be right." Hakoda glanced inshore, toward Toph's shelter. "He's a fugitive, Sokka. Princess Azula tried to kill him; that means she thinks the Fire Lord won't mind if he dies. And Iroh is a known traitor. Those two should be in chains. Or dead. But Jee is *protecting* them. Does that sound right?"

"No, it sounds crazy," Sokka said honestly. "Half the stuff that happens around Aang is crazy. I got kidnapped to the spirit world once, and I don't even remember it; Katara had to tell me how Aang got me back from the Hei Bai spirit. Which, I've got to say, was at least half luck." *What the heck is going on? Yesterday he was agreeing with me.*

Then again, yesterday Zuko hadn't blown up a tent, proven he could out-heal Katara, and yelled about Avatars loud enough to freak out the whole camp. The guy was hard on your nerves.

Firebender, heading this way, Sokka told himself, peering at the small boat cutting through the water. *Figure out what's up with Dad and Katara later... oh heck, I left Toph with Zuko!*

He tried to freak out over that. Really. But Toph and Iroh were getting along like a house on fire... and Zuko actually seemed to trust Toph.

Besides. When it came down to the angry jerk versus the world's greatest earthbender? He'd bet on Toph.

Zuko crouched on dry sand, eyeing it with suspicion. Teruko was an unshakable shadow behind him, and Iroh was calmly sipping his tea. A few yards away, Toph smirked, and cracked her knuckles. "Okay, Sparky. Show me what you've got."

"I'm not sure this will work." Flattening his hands on the shore, he breathed out, long and hard. Studied thin wisps of rising steam, and the shimmer of heat over his hands. "Heats up faster than water, at least."

Closing his eyes, Zuko concentrated, feeling for that elusive sense of *fire-in-other*. There, and there, and there...

Pull, he told himself. *But gently*. Sand felt different than water or leaf-bits. But fire was fire, and what worked for one should work again.

Eyes still shut, hands out, Zuko rose.

"*Urk.*"

Teruko. Definitely. Daring, Zuko opened his eyes.

Sand formed thin streamers from his fingers to the ground, a fine dust falling as bits cooled and slipped his grasp.

"Loses heat faster, too," Zuko observed, balling what was still hot between his hands and breathing flame into it. Sand rippled between his palms, flexing and sifting as he played with it, just like streaming water. Very heavy, *stubborn* water.

Uncle beamed, delighted. Toph looked like someone had someone had handed her her very own bowl of fresh apricot mochi. And Teruko...

The marine was swearing under her breath; unintelligible curses that flung up words like *crazy* and *genius*, and seemed to promise something potentially fatally embarrassing to Captain Jee.

"Can't move a rock, but you can move lots of *little* rocks." Toph nodded, decided. "So. What if I do this?" She lifted her hands, sand flowing up at her command to merge into his ball-

And *yanked*.

Oh, you are so on.

A proper firebender would have yanked right back. But that would have ripped the fire from the earth, leaving each of them with only their own element. And that wasn't the point of this game. Zuko snapped out a whip of flame instead, tangling it deeper into sand as he added push to her pull.

She's really rooted.

And she still almost overbalanced, before sliding sideways and shoving the sand with her.

Direct. Not like firebending, exactly. But I wonder...

Earthbending was neutral jin. Listen, wait, and strike. So what was the answer to that?

The mountain takes the blow. The dragon avoids it.

Fire needed sharper movements than water. But he could still drag his fingers through, splitting hot sand into a noodle-nest of shimmering strands, fire swirling in with each pass.

Earth was the mountain; the lone, proud fortress. How would the world's greatest earthbender deal with endless flickering flames?

Grinning, Toph leapt, landed, and wrenched her hands like turning engine bolts. Still shimmering hot, sand began to fuse into braided strands of stone.

We'll see about that.

Zuko tamped down his own smile, reminding himself of what was really at stake here. Not winning. *Testing*. Seeing what would work, and what wouldn't. And in the process, getting a good look at Toph's unusual style. He'd seen a lot of earthbenders, and Toph wasn't quite like any of them.

Accidentally or not, he'd dragged Shirong right into the middle of the spirits' plans for the Avatar. The least he could do was try to bring back a few new moves to help the agent survive them.

Damn it, Shirong, stay alive. Let me have one thing I did right. Stay alive - and stay away from

This, Shirong thought wryly, stepping out of stone into Quan's new rooms in the palace, *is, quite possibly, the dumbest thing I've ever done.*

Spirits, the sunlight felt good.

As Tingzhe closed the wall behind them, Shirong swept his gaze over the room's company of rebels. Min, that dangerous girl Mai, and... Quan. Looking like a spirit-slaughter warmed over.

Shirong crossed the room in a few strides, looking squarely into devastated brown eyes. "What happened?"

"She killed him." There was a horrid flatness to Quan's tone. "I protected her from the general because she was Long Feng's ally... and he thought we had the upper hand, and she killed him." The senior agent shook his head, still in shock. "It happened so *fast*..."

"The Fire Lord always did like her best." Mai's voice was stoic, as Min left her side to bow awkwardly in front of his father. "She's deadly. Zuko's... not. Not if he can find another way."

Tingzhe didn't wait for his son to rise, wrapping the teenager in a fierce hug. "Apologies later, young man," he said firmly. Voice low, in case there were watchers Quan hadn't distracted elsewhere. "You owe quite a few of them... but later. Stay alive. Do you hear me? Don't make your mother break out the sleeve knives to hunt someone down. Spirits, a week ago I didn't even know what 'Flight of the Moth-Owls' *was*."

Mai's brow arched up, intrigued.

At least someone's life is rising from the ashes. Shirong focused back on Quan. "The message we received said something about plans to bring the Outer Wall down?"

"I had to convince her I was worth keeping alive." Quan swallowed dryly. "If she's close enough, then..."

"No!" Shirong said fiercely. "We've lost Long Feng. We can't lose you, too! The Dai Li need a leader; our city needs the Dai Li. Don't throw your life away. Not when there's a better choice!"

"Speaking as a citizen myself, I would have to second that," Tingzhe frowned. "If his chosen heir dies inside these walls, Fire Lord Ozai's wrath will know no bounds. And if what friends of the Avatar say is true, soon even the walls of Ba Sing Se will not protect us."

Quan blinked, as if reluctantly dragging himself back toward life. "But... if she's gone..."

"Sozin's Comet is returning," Shirong said plainly. The jolt he'd felt hearing that from Huojin had mostly subsided. Mostly. "That's the power Sozin used to destroy the Air Temples. In *one day*." He shuddered. "I doubt our walls would fare any better."

The power of a hundred suns. Will I feel it too? It's already too much, I don't have any training- what do I do?

Quan shook his head again, as if to deny the faint hints of color coming back into his face. "You don't understand. Long Feng is dead. She *has* to die!"

"I believe I do understand," Tingzhe mused. "You were loyal to the Grand Secretariat. His loss wounded your spirit. And that wound is compounded by seeing your fellow agents follow his murderer." He paused. "But think of your duties to this city, and your people. We need you alive far more than we need her dead. For the Earth King's sake."

"Bon did it?" Quan looked slightly less ghastly. "But - the Princess' plan-"

"Isn't that bad an idea," Shirong said thoughtfully. Held up his hands as Quan glared; secretly relieved to see that anger, instead of bleak determination. "I've studied the Fire Nation. If they take territory, it's considered *theirs*. If Ba Sing Se is occupied, it won't be destroyed." *I hope.*

"The spirits will be angry," Quan began.

"Any angrier than they were because of Lake Laogai?" Shirong said pointedly. "We can't let her know about... something that spiritually dubious." Mai had broken her loyalty to the princess, she likely wouldn't betray them - but better safe than sorry. "We *need* you still in charge. You have the best chance of steering the other agents away from mentioning it." He smiled slightly. "And if there are openings in the walls, Lee's plan gains certain advantages."

"The general took him and left," Quan bit out.

"He'll be back," Shirong said fiercely. Paused, still shaken by that certainty. "He's a great name, and he has *promised* his people. He *will* come for us."

The words hung in the air, condemning him from his own mouth. *Oh, damn.*

"Us?" Quan's eyes narrowed.

"Allow me," Tingzhe put in, before Shirong could try to stammer an excuse. "Apparently, mingled heritages can crop up at unexpected times. I assure you, from everything I've seen, Agent Shirong has never intended to be anything but a loyal Dai Li. Unfortunately, Lee learned under Amaya." He gave Quan a significant look. "She has quite a way with spirit-touched wounds."

All of which was true. Only the implications were a lie. "He has to know," Shirong said impulsively. *I can't live another lie. I won't.*

"He most certainly does *not*," Tingzhe said harshly. "He is in Azula's company, and from what her brother has told me, the only safe way to keep a secret from her is not to know it at all." Hazel narrowed at Quan. "Agent Shirong is a good man, and what he intends will not only help this city, but strike a subtle blow the Fire Princess will never recover from. Which would you rather have? Her death, knowing it will devastate this city? Or the chance to sabotage the Fire Nation and give the Avatar *time*?"

"The Avatar," Quan said bleakly, "is *dead*."

"So she's proclaimed. But lightning doesn't always kill," Tingzhe shot back. "And he left with *two* healing benders. He has a *chance*." The professor's voice softened. "I can't imagine how you must feel, Agent Quan. But there is hope. For us, for the Earth Kingdom, and for the world. Don't give up."

"And if you really want to hurt Azula, you won't kill her," Mai said levelly. "You'll do something she can't control."

"I thought she was your friend-" Min cut himself off.

"I know Zuko," Mai said simply. "If he wins, if he can, Azula will still be alive. If she does..." A minimal shrug. "That's always been the Fire Lord's hold on her. *Do what I say, or your brother might be heir again.*" She glanced down. "I knew she hated that. I didn't know she hated *him*. It's not Zuko's fault he was born first." She met Quan's gaze, dead level. "She's still royal blood. I'm still Fire Nation. If you try to kill her, I'll stop you. But if you want her to *suffer*... I'll help."

"And Ty Lee?" Quan said raggedly.

"My parents can protect my brother. Ty Lee has six sisters. They're... vulnerable." Mai shook her head slightly. "I don't know. I think she's covering for me. But she likes Azula."

"Let's not borrow trouble." Shirong handed Quan a list they'd compiled. "What do you think?"

Quan started, and Shirong knew which item he'd hit. "You want a *whole* cache?" Quan said incredulously.

Airbending and all. "We do," Shirong nodded. "Can you think of anything that would cut her deeper than undermining her ancestors' efforts to destroy *primitive* bending styles?"

A smile slashed viciously across Quan's face. "Some of this, we can do. The rest..."

"Min knows how to find people who can contact us," Shirong said plainly. "Let us know when you can."

A few more moments for Tingzhe to hug an embarrassed teenager again, and they slipped back into concealing stone. "I had no idea so much of the palace wasn't solid," Tingzhe said soberly.

"The problem's not getting in, it's slipping in and out without being noticed," Shirong nodded, keeping his voice down. "So long as all I do is listen, I can guide us past the watchers Quan won't know about. I just hope the princess isn't as good as her uncle at listening for fire."

About to earthbend a door open, Tingzhe paused. "The watchers Quan *doesn't* know about?"

Shirong gave him a bleak smile. "Azula's not a fool. She has to know he wants her dead. But she also knows if she kills or imprisons Long Feng's second in command this soon, anyone with uncertain loyalty might desert her. She's setting a trap for him. Waiting to *catch* him betraying her, where the others can see. I can almost smell it."

The professor frowned. "And Quan doesn't see... no, he wouldn't, would he? He's in too much pain."

"You may have hated what Long Feng did to the city, but he led us well," Shirong said soberly. "I just hope we've convinced Quan to lull her suspicions. If we can buy a little time to get Kuei up to speed, and persuade him to order Quan underground..."

Tingzhe nodded. "And if Lee shows up?"

Not if. When. I hope. "Then things get interesting." *Come on, kid. Find a way to get word to us. A runner, a messenger hawk... spirits, even a smoke signal.*

"Indeed," Tingzhe snorted.

Shirong eyed him. "Oh?"

"I don't believe his majesty has ever met anyone of equal rank before," the professor said dryly. "It

will be... unique."

Earth Kingdom meets Fire Nation. Shirong pictured it, and winced.

Oh, well. That was the future. For now... Prince Zuko might attract trouble like a lodestone, but he shouldn't be in the midst of that particular sticky mess, yet. Lee knew how to keep his head down, his mouth shut, and not look Fire Nation at all. He should be fine.

Why can't I believe that?

Heading for Teruko with the bad news, Sadao had to stop. Blink. Rub his eyes, and look again. *Huh. Grandpa never made glass that way.*

Beside him, the Water Tribe's second in command swore under his breath. "What does that crazy little girl think she's doing?"

"Playing, sir," Sadao said honestly. The captain *had* said to be polite.

"Playing?" Bato turned a furious look on him. "Your *prince* is taunting a helpless little blind-"

"Master earthbender," Sadao said firmly. "You have to be a really good bender to make it look that easy. Sir." *We're the ones who should be worried. If she decides to just sink the prince...* Sadao tried not to shiver. The captain said Lady Bei Fong was an honorable opponent and temporary ally. Which meant she probably wouldn't. But she was also the Avatar's friend. And everyone had seen what *he* was capable of.

We've got a truce. Don't break it.

He wasn't a violent man. Never wanted to be. But he was an officer in the Fire Navy, he'd sworn oaths - and knowing the prince needed this truce didn't make him any less terrified of being anywhere *near* the young airbender.

Or any less determined to... do what he had to do. If the captain ordered. Even if the airbender was just a child. He'd seen the North Pole. That wasn't a *child*.

Sadao was an officer, and an officer had to use his own judgment. But for right now? He was going to trust the captain knew what he was doing. Because right now it was taking everything he had to push the panic into a corner and *think*, he really didn't want to be setting the camp on fire by accident-

"Damn bitch hen!"

And... he was supposed to be warning the prince's camp about the approaching caravan. Couldn't he *ever* get anything right?

Yelps, swears, and screams spread through the Water Tribe camp. Prince Zuko and Lady Bei Fong broke off their contest in almost the same instant... though the earthbender took one moment to poke a stiff finger twice, and then curve it, leaving a smiley-face in a tall lump of cooling white glass.

Prince Zuko ignored it, listening to the rising chaos. Eyes widening, he stood straight, and *whistled*.

Chirruping a battle-cry, a night-black ostrich-horse surged past scattering blue-clad tribesmen,

bloodied claws stomping to a halt in reach of one young, smirking, about to be mauled royal firebender-

"Hey, sweetheart," the prince crooned.

The hen ducked her head and whistled, nudging into scratching fingers. Rolled her eye at Teruko's cautious approach, raising one threatening foot.

"Asahi, no," the prince said firmly, looking over the heavy-laden packs on her gear. "Lieutenant Teruko, the last I knew, Asahi was with an Earth Kingdom caravan master who made a circuit near Ba Sing Se..."

"Yes, sir," Sadao got out, and could the earth *please* open up and swallow him now? "We saw the caravan coming in, about five men and a lot of ostrich-horses. Chief Hakoda confirms it's probably their supplies." He swallowed. "Sir, the captain says he'll await your orders, but he thinks we're just going to have to bluff?"

"He is right," General Iroh said ruefully. "It is not their numbers that are the threat, but the word they will carry. Still, I believe- oh, dear."

Tall, was Sadao's first impression of the young lady getting off another of the caravan's mounts. Followed close by, *cute*.

Okay, so she was Earth Kingdom. He was a *guy*. And they'd all been at sea for quite some time, and... was that an angry guy with a spear in a green Army uniform following her?

Darn. Boyfriend.

Xiu walked through the carnage left by one ticked ostrich-horse, shaking her head. Huizhong had promised her a little excitement, all right... though he'd been thinking along the lines of *safe* excitement. Everyone knew the Water Tribe had taken on every Fire Nation force that'd dared to swarm toward Ba Sing Se, and held them back. And one little hen had dropped them like Pai Sho pieces?

Granted, Asahi apparently had a temper that bordered on incandescent. Which fit, given the young healer Xiu knew had last owned the hen. And what could have parted a war orphan from one of the few creatures in the world that actually *liked* him-

There he is! He's...

The weaver stopped dead in her tracks, jaw dropping. Lee. Mushi. Fire Nation uniforms. Asahi, leaning into Lee. An odd glass sculpture behind him, radiating heat, and an even odder little girl dressed like she'd come straight out of an Earth Rumble. Fire Nation uniforms. Ships, both wood and metal, Water Tribe blue surrounding this small knot of black and red...

She looked at Lee. Pale, thin Lee, who walked like a noble and didn't know anything about people and had a temper like a forest fire. And felt the world flip upside down.

Pale. Black hair. Gold eyes... dragon's eyes...

Fingers buried in Asahi's feathers, he stared back.

"Oma and Shu, it's an invasion, come on-" Huizhong grabbed her wrist.

Xiu twisted loose, a move Dad had taught her years ago, and kept on staring. "You know, with most people who *weren't* raised by raven-wolves," or *Fire Navy firebenders, oh spirits, how?* "This is where they say, 'I can explain *everything*'."

Lee blinked. Reddened slightly. "How could I possibly explain *this*?"

Yep. That was definitely Lee. "Or, this isn't what it looks like?" Xiu suggested.

"No, it's pretty much what it looks like," Mushi said thoughtfully. Glanced at his nephew. "What do you think it looks like?"

Lee clapped a hand to his forehead, groaning.

"Worse than it really is," the girl said firmly, striding forward. "Toph Bei Fong, of the Bei Fong family."

Xiu bit back a whistle. *Everyone* knew that particular Gaoling merchant powerhouse. Though she'd never heard they had a daughter.

"I know it's weird, but Lee and Uncle Mushi helped my friends get out of a really tough spot," Toph went on. "And one of my friends really, really needs Lee's help. So... could we just not tell the Army they're here? Just for a few days?"

"Not tell the Army?" Huizhong sputtered.

"Your superiors will have far greater concerns than our simple presence under truce," Mushi said seriously. "Ba Sing Se has fallen, taken from the inside by Princess Azula and her allies. The Earth King, if he is fortunate, is in hiding. Your forces, and your supply lines, are about to be drastically compromised."

Ba Sing Se has fallen. Xiu swallowed dryly. That... that couldn't be, everyone had heard the Avatar was in Ba Sing Se, surely he would have-

The Avatar is twelve years old!

Lee's own words, resounding through her head with a fury and frustration she hadn't understood... then. But if Lee was *Fire Nation*...

"That's impossible," Huizhong said uneasily. With a glance at her Xiu knew meant he *believed* them... and didn't want to. "The Dragon of the West couldn't take Ba Sing Se."

"Not from the outside, strength against strength, by the principles of High War," Lee said levelly. "Azula used those of Low War, and exploited the city's weaknesses from within. They may be fooling people on the outside right now, but they're *gone*. You need to retreat and regroup, or the earthbenders she's suborned will just work outward from the walls and take you all down."

Xiu eyed Lee... though if that was his real name, she'd set her next warp with spider silk. "You just can't *do* normal, can you?"

"Nope!" Toph grinned, latching onto an arm as Lee flushed red. "Sparky's one of a kind."

"Would you not do that, little girl?" One of the Water Tribesmen winced. "It's... just not right."

Letting go, Toph cracked her knuckles. "Bato? We need to clear a few things up about *little*."

"It's all right," Lee said levelly. "Earth's supposed to be level-headed, right? We could use that in

between us right now."

"Yes," Mushi mused, peering past them all. "I believe that is the caravan master heading this way." A hint of calculation slipped into his smile. "If he gives you any trouble, remind him that our terms were that Asahi was only loaned into his care, until such a time as we left Ba Sing Se."

"Ooo, *terms*." Toph's grin was pure dealing merchant. "Let me at 'im."

"We're going to talk," Xiu said firmly to Lee, as Huizhong tugged her gently away behind the tribesmen. "Later."

"Fire Nation. Sweet earth and sky," her spear-wielding boyfriend finally murmured as they got out of earshot. "We need to get you out of here - we need to get a message back-"

"I think you should talk to Chief Hakoda, first," Bato said soberly. "You're in charge of the other guards?"

"Sergeant Huizhong," he nodded, "and yes, I am, but-"

"Toph's telling the truth," Bato said bluntly. "We don't like it any more than you do, but right now we need... Lee." He shook his head in disbelief. "Lee?"

"It's a common name," Xiu shrugged. And had to smile. "I knew he'd be a good healer."

Bato choked in mid-step. "*A firebender?*"

"What? He's not..." Xiu swallowed, remembering a candle flickering without a draft, and a healer who wasn't *bending* the water up, but using a cloth to move it, soaking it again and again in... "That little mischief."

"Xiu?" Huizhong gave her a questioning look. He'd heard her story of the two refugees; he knew what she'd thought.

"Hot water," Xiu chuckled. Fire Nation, sure - but he *was* a kid. And that had to have taken the kind of sheer nerve you only saw in spirit-tales. "Almost *boiling* hot."

Her boyfriend had to whistle at that, worry easing into a reluctant smile. "Smart kid." Huizhong grimaced. "And if he were Earth Kingdom, that'd be good, but..." His voice trailed off, as they approached a serious-looking Water Tribe man with blue-beaded braids and the faintest laugh lines around blue eyes.

"Chief Hakoda," Bato introduced him. "Sergeant Huizhong, and the young lady's apparently met our two... guests... some time ago. As Lee, and *Uncle* Mushi."

"Have you?" Hakoda gestured, beckoning a teenager some distance across the camp. "Would you mind telling us about that?"

"Chief Hakoda, with all due respect, you have the *Fire Navy* here," Huizhong said firmly. "And they say Ba Sing Se's under threat. We need to inform the Army!"

"About Ba Sing Se, yes," Hakoda replied. "But I doubt Lee would do that much healing in chains. And that's exactly where he'll be if the Army gets involved. There, or dead. I have a desperately injured child on my hands, and *for the moment*, we need Lee."

For the moment? Xiu narrowed her eyes. Lee might have been lying about who and what he was,

sure; but wouldn't *anyone*, if they were caught in enemy lands? *He's just a kid.*

Granted, a kid who... knew how to deal with bandits. But that didn't make him a bad person. Just sad.

"And we need his uncle, and with that man comes that... collection of armored menaces he guided in." Hakoda shook his head. "I'm not saying we shouldn't inform your superiors. But we need more time."

"He's not healing anyone right now," Huizhong observed. With a glance her way that said he knew what she was thinking, and kid or not, Lee *was* the enemy. And he was sorry, but that was the way the world was.

We're going to talk about that, later, Xiu eyed him back.

"Apparently the body needs time to rest between sessions," Bato shrugged. "If they're all as explosive as the last one, my nerves could use the break." He nodded at Huizhong. "Let's go talk your men out of anything drastic."

Huizhong touched Xiu's hand before he left, giving her a wry smile. She gave him a rueful one back. *I'll be fine. Honest.*

"Is it true?" she fired at Hakoda before he could ask any more. "Has the Fire Nation taken Ba Sing Se?"

"They told you?" The chief frowned. "Why would they do that?"

"Maybe because they're decent people?" Xiu eyed the man skeptically.

"You have no idea who they are, Miss-?"

"Xiu. And no," she admitted, looking back toward those distant spots of red. "I guess I don't." *But I think I know more than you.*

You could tell a lot about somebody by how they treated animals. Asahi hadn't run from Lee. She'd run *to* him.

He looks out for a hen who doesn't like anybody, and he worries about a little boy everybody else wants to save the world.

Kindness. That was hard enough to find in the Earth Kingdom. She couldn't imagine how a *firebender* had kept that part of himself alive, and walked away unscarred...

Except he didn't, Xiu knew, as Hakoda's youngster joined them. *I've seen refugees. I know what people look like when they've lost everything.* And that didn't count the nightmares she'd had, putting together what she'd seen of wounded soldiers around her dad and Huizhong to figure out exactly what must have happened to Lee.

Let the Army take Lee in chains after he'd healed Toph's friend? Not exactly the noble Water Tribe warriors she'd heard stories of.

Wait. See what they want to know.

"Sokka," Hakoda smiled. "Xiu says she knows our... guest, Lee. And his uncle, Mushi."

"Lee?" Sokka started. "Wait a minute..."

"How did you meet him?" Hakoda asked.

"At an inn," Xiu said honestly. "My grandmother had one of her awful headaches, and the innkeeper said there was a healer who could help. And Lee did." She looked directly at Hakoda. "He wasn't a very nice young man. But he was decent, and honest. And if you're going to just turn him over to the Army - don't you think his own people have done enough to him already?"

"Yeah, he's an exile," Sokka said impatiently. "Fine, we get it, the Fire Nation thinks that's the worst thing that can happen to you-" He cut himself off. "But if you don't know who he is, how do you know that?"

Exile? Men! Sokka wasn't a short kid, but she was taller. And apparently Water Tribe men just did not expect a woman to attack.

Xiu had her fist in front of his eye before he could blink. "Think again, mister. Look at that scar Lee's carrying, and *think*."

Sokka jumped back, and stared up at her. "You're not dressed like a Kyoshi Warrior..."

"My dad came to the mainland to fight, and never went back," Xiu said plainly. "You're right. I don't know who Lee is, or what he did before he and his uncle washed up as refugees. But that's what I saw, helping my grandmother. *Refugees*. An old man worried he was going to lose his nephew before he could teach Lee to trust people again... and a scared teenager who was probably Toph's age when some bastard of a firebender stuck his fist in Lee's *face*."

Sokka gulped.

"So if you've got a good reason to hate Lee, you tell me right now," Xiu glared at him. "He's rude, and awkward, and he's got less manners than a cat-owl - but he's a *healer*. Do you know what kind of guts that takes, helping people instead of hurting them? When there was *nobody* to help you when *you* needed it?"

"Man, Master Pakku could have used you at the North Pole," Sokka muttered.

Xiu blinked, taken aback. "The invasion? I'm just a silk weaver. I don't think I really could have helped."

"No. Not what you can do. What you said. That healing takes guts." Sokka glanced at his father. "We fought the Fire Nation all the way to the North Pole. Katara used everything she'd taught herself, everything she could figure out, and we *just* made it there. She wanted to do more. She wanted to learn everything about waterbending, so we could help... our friend. She wanted to *fight*." He grimaced. "And then Master Pakku said it was forbidden, and she should go play nice with the little girls learning from Yugoda. And when he caught her learning from somebody else, and was going to throw them *both* out - she blew up. Wrecked half the audience chamber trying to fight him, until he said he'd teach her."

Hakoda winced. "That's why she never had more healing lessons?"

"What, and let Pakku change his mind?" Sokka shrugged. "He worked people into the ice, dawn to dusk, every day. A- our friend might have gotten away with just playing in the snow, but no way was she going to give Pakku a chance to kick her out... What's so funny?"

Xiu tried not to snicker. "It's called irony, Sokka. When you get to be my age, you'll probably look back on this and *laugh*."

"Laugh?" Sokka straightened from his slouch, blue eyes hard and dangerous. "Look, one of our best friends is hurt! A few days ago, he almost died! There's nothing funny about this."

"Oh yeah?" Xiu said dryly. "Your Master Pakku told Katara to go be a *good* girl and heal, and she tore up the ice to fight, instead." She jabbed a thumb back toward that knot of red and black. "What do you think the Fire Nation taught a *firebender* to do?"

Sokka gaped for a moment, speechless. "Lee is *nothing* like my sister!"

"Then maybe I should feel sorry for your sister," Xiu said quietly. "Because from what I saw? Even after everything that's happened to him, after being raised a firebender? There's a pretty decent kid in there." She crossed her arms, and eyed Hakoda. "And I'm going to go talk to him. Now."

"Yes," Hakoda said thoughtfully, "I suppose you are." He gave her a suspiciously cool look. "We'll go with you. I happen to know what men like these are capable of, when unarmed women are involved."

That stopped her cold, just as he'd intended. But Xiu swallowed hard, and marched on. *Mushi said they were under truce. And I know what I saw.*

And she was seeing it again, now, as Lee quietly talked Asahi into letting Toph and one of the firebenders offer hands to sniff.

...That one's a woman.

The firebender saw her looking, and gave her a flat look that needed no words. *Yeah. Girl here. Want to make something of it?*

Xiu gave her a shrug, and a half-smile, aware of the Water Tribesmen behind her. And the caravan master, Xiaobo, stomping away from the group with Asahi's packs over his shoulder, muttering under his breath.

"Did they cheat you?" Hakoda asked; keeping his voice low, though they were still out of earshot of the firebenders.

"Cheat? For that foul-tempered, sharp-clawed..." Xiaobo snorted. "Bei Fongs don't cheat. Shear a sheep-pig down to the skin, but they don't *cheat*." He frowned. "No, there's something about those two in green... swear I've seen them somewhere, besides Ba Sing Se..."

Toph caught at Lee's sleeve, lips barely moving.

"Eh, it'll come to me... Better shut of that hen, I swear! Tough as nails, maybe - but give me a biddable beast who'll let you check its nails, and never mind how many times you have to trim them!" Still cursing, he headed back to camp, casting nervous glances back every third step.

The gold-eyed woman watched him, her own voice low as Xiu and her escort approached. "Anybody else want to yell *boo*?"

"Lieutenant," Lee shook his head. "I don't think Chief Hakoda would appreciate it if we spooked the man's whole pack string."

"I can't say I much appreciate it now," Hakoda said dryly. "Where did you get that menace?"

Confused silence. "Menace, sir?" one of the men offered. No faceplate, but no weapons, either. Which meant firebender, if Xiu remembered what she'd heard right.

That's why I never saw it. Lee's a firebender, but he uses dao? How did that happen?

"Lieutenant Sadao." Hakoda's voice could have chilled flame. "You're not going to tell me that is a normal animal."

"She is pretty snarly," Xiu admitted, looking straight at Lee. "I was surprised you could talk her out of biting that stable-hand." She'd been out early that morning, getting a few more minutes away from Grandma. Just long enough to see Asahi measure up the strange boy for convenient clawing spots, and catch Lee's shy wave before he and his uncle headed out of town. When an ostrich-horse got *that* look in its eye - well.

"She's probably got skirmisher in her background," Sadao said thoughtfully. "A lot of Yonaguni stock does. My cousin Chiko looks after a flock over..." His words trailed off in the face of Hakoda's ever more incredulous stare, and he tried to shrug. "Well... she's probably not what anyone would want for a pack beast, no. Where'd you find her, sir?"

Xiu raised an eyebrow. Lee rated a *sir*? Weirder and weirder.

"It's a long story," Lee muttered.

"Not too long," Mushi said confidently. "We were some way north of here... we heard of a ranch afflicted with illness, and offered our services. Asahi was one of those most gravely ill. Unfortunately, it was not a normal illness, but sickness unleashed by a plague kami, in the wake of a great wrong by the ranch's owner. Things became very dangerous, very quickly... and once the spirit was defeated, we - er - were forced to leave without formal payment."

Plague spirit? Xiu swallowed. *And they beat it?*

"You stole her!" Sokka accused them.

Armored gold glared at the boy. Lee barely looked annoyed. "There was a mob coming. We had to leave before anyone got hurt."

"Yeah, right, like that makes it okay-"

"Gaipan," Lee said levelly.

Sokka stopped mid-word. "...I warned them."

"And for that I am glad," Mushi nodded. "I have always respected the honor of the Water Tribe. But the fact remains that your sister and her friend allowed themselves to be used in a plot to flood that village, and nearly cost thousands of lives. The damage will take years to rebuild, if they ever do; I myself would advise they do not, given the demonstrated danger." He regarded Sokka, one brow arched. "We burned down a ranch and stole one beast. To stop a plague that was already spreading beyond its source, and threatened great suffering to the whole of the Earth Kingdom. That sickness would *not* have stopped with only animals."

"How do you even know about Gaipan?" Sokka demanded.

Oh, didn't have an answer for that one, huh, kid? Xiu smirked to herself.

Lee snorted. "I tracked you, remember?"

Come on, don't let him off that easy! Xiu had to hide a shiver. Plague wasn't common, but when it happened... spirits. One ranch burned down? That was getting off *light*.

"Plague spirit?" Hakoda looked lost.

"They happen, when people... when something really goes wrong." Xiu shuddered. "How did you find a shaman? I heard they all went into the mountains years ago, and just never came out."

Waiting for the Avatar. Like everyone else.

Everyone but Lee. No wonder he had guts enough to heal. *He* wasn't waiting for someone else to fix the world.

"We did not," Mushi said simply. "Not all of them remain in the mountains. Some are near Omashu, advising King Bumi; I had the fortune of meeting them, many years ago. So I do know means of fending off lesser spirits. We could not cleanse the land as a shaman would, and bid a kami depart... but my nephew and I are healers, and any illness can be fought. We revealed the crime that had given it entry to our world, and the guilty were punished. It had no mortal form, but only one of spirit; sear that, and it was forced to abandon the physical world."

Sokka crossed skeptical arms. "Let me guess. You just decided to help Earth Kingdom *peasants* because you're really *good* people."

"Who said I was a good person?" Lee watched Sokka openly, hands still stroking black feathers. "People were going to die if somebody didn't do something. We were *there*."

And you weren't, Xiu could almost see Lee bite back.

"You... you don't make any sense!" Sokka sputtered. "We met Master Jeong Jeong. He said fire was just destruction and misery!"

Sadao looked startled; Teruko, outraged. "Always heard he was cracked," someone in armor muttered.

"General Jeong Jeong suffered greatly in the war," Mushi said plainly. "Fire has many uses, but my friend was most skilled at the most lethal. I do not doubt that weighs heavily on his spirit." He smiled gently. "I hope that we will find him, after we depart. If he could learn fire's other path, he might at last find peace."

Hakoda's eyes narrowed at that. *Why?* Xiu wondered. *Doesn't he want them to leave after Sokka's friend is healed? It'd make things simpler for everyone. A lot simpler.*

Unless the chief didn't want Lee to just leave.

In chains or dead. And those firebenders are calling him sir.

Not just a refugee. Lee and his uncle were *important*.

But Sokka says Lee's an exile. It doesn't make sense. "Why do you have to teach a general?" Xiu blurted out. Anything, to keep them talking. "If he's a master, doesn't he know all of firebending?"

Heavy silence. Lee swallowed. "This... this has been lost, Xiu. For a long time."

"At least two centuries," Mushi said gravely. "Our legends still speak of those who wielded the healing fire... but they are thought to be only legends. Stories for children. Not to be believed."

A legend. Lee found a legend? Xiu tried not to let her eyes widen. Suddenly, all the armor made a lot of sense. As did the chief's reaction. She liked Lee, she did, but the thought of the Fire Nation armies with *healers* on top of everything else.... *Sorry, kid. Really. I just hope they don't hurt you.*

"What, like the Avatar?" Sokka eyed Lee.

"How odd you should mention that," Mushi said, dangerously mild. "Do you wish to know our legend of the Avatar, Sokka? It is closely tied to the healing fire, and its extinction. Closely, indeed. Would you know of it? Or would you prefer to see the airbender as your sister sees him; a source of light and hope only, and not a font of misery, and grief, and devastation such as even you, who have seen the Siege of the North, have never witnessed?"

Xiu shivered. And didn't feel any better at the uneasy way the soldiers shifted, exchanging glances until Teruko gave Sadao a firm look. Sadao swallowed. "Sir. They're not...."

"It shames us to admit we could not protect our own, and we dislike showing shame to strangers," Mushi nodded.

Odd, Xiu thought, how Mushi could make *dislike* sound like *I'd rather be hanged, drawn, and quartered*.

"But as Toph has reminded me, part of this war resulted from the fact that we *do not understand* other nations. And they know even less of us." Mushi's gaze held Sokka's, not at all harmless. "The choice is yours. To hear - and believe, or not, if you hear. But you cannot unchoose it."

"Whatever he picks, somebody sure better tell *me*," Toph said bluntly. "I've got sand here, and I hear getting that out of armor *bites*."

Teruko blinked at the little blind girl, and suddenly grinned. "Sir, can we keep her?"

"Hey!" Sokka and Toph said as one.

Lee was actually shaking. Xiu drew back a step, wary-

Until she heard the first giggle.

Leaning on a chuffing Asahi, Lee shook with muffled laughter, wiping away a tear. "S-sorry, Toph," he hiccupped. "They think you're cute!"

"Cute?" Sokka yelped, as Toph's jaw dropped. "Have you *lived* with this girl? She's stubborn and short-tempered and destructive as a- Hey, wait a minute...."

"Thanks, Sokka. Thanks a lot." Toph poked Lee in the ribs. "Keep that up, you're going to hurt something."

"Too late," Lee snickered. "Oh, ow...."

"That was you!" Sokka burst out. "I *knew* I heard somebody laughing when we got the ship into the river... that was you!"

"Funniest thing I'd seen in months," Lee admitted, catching his breath. "All those pirates, chasing their own ship...." He sobered. "Then they stole our ship. That was a long walk."

An exile had a ship? Xiu shook her head. Sokka was right. Lee didn't make sense.

"Same pirates Katara stole the waterbending scroll from?" Toph asked, almost innocently.

"Yes; I believe they never did reacquire it," Mushi nodded.

"Stole?" Hakoda's face turned cold. "Truce or not, you have no right to insult my daughter."

He insulted her? Xiu thought, incredulous. *Toph's the one who said it!*

"It's... not an insult, Dad," Sokka said reluctantly. "She did. We didn't know until later. Man, you wouldn't believe how close that came to getting all of us killed..." He shot a suspicious glance at Toph. "How'd you know about it?"

She shrugged, and pointed at Lee. "We had some time to talk. And since Katara and Twinkletoes tend to leave stuff out that doesn't make them look good, I asked him what happened. South Pole on."

"You asked *him*?" Sokka said in disbelief.

"Why not? I know when people lie to me. I'm pretty sure Lee doesn't always know why you guys do things - he thinks Twinkletoes is crazy, and your sister's crazier - but just 'cause sometimes he's *wrong*, doesn't mean he's lying." She cracked her knuckles again. "So? Who's talking?"

"Him," Sokka pointed.

"Me?" Sadao gulped.

"If this is a tale of your people, you should know it as well," Hakoda said levelly. "And you just came ashore. So if Mushi is lying-"

"He's not," Toph said warningly.

"-Or shading the truth... you haven't had enough time to collaborate on a story." Hakoda eyed the firebender. Waiting.

"It's... well, I'm not a good storyteller, and-" Sadao made an abortive wave toward Xiu. "I'd rather not offer insult to the lady."

"Kyoshi," Sokka said suddenly. "This is about Avatar Kyoshi." He shook his head. "She's been dead almost two hundred years!"

"She has," Sadao allowed. "But we'll never forget. Even when you just read it in the history scrolls..." He swallowed dryly. "When we laid siege to the Northern Tribe - we're military, we know the risks. Nobody expected *that*, but... you go out to fight, everyone knows you might not come home. What she did..."

"I believe they need some background," Mushi said judiciously. "We are folk of the ocean, as you are, Chief Hakoda; for the Fire Nation is a land of islands, and some clans even live on shipboard, barely setting foot to land."

Fire Nation on the ocean? Xiu didn't try to keep her jaw from dropping. Everyone knew the Fire Nation invaded on ships, sure; but firebenders living on them? That was crazy. Wood burned...

Fire Navy ships are metal.

"And, just as your people have in the past when they were stronger," Mushi went on, "we have had our share of unsavory sorts who dealt in *high-risk trading*."

"Fire Nation pirates?" Sokka rolled his eyes. "Why do I have no problem seeing that.... Hey! We're not pirates!"

"Not now. History lessons, remember?" Toph said pointedly, before he could sputter more. "Some

people say Chin the Conqueror got his start power-grabbing 'cause he set up coast watches that the Earth King wouldn't. For ships from all over the place. *Not* just from the West."

"Says the person books don't do anything for?" Sokka pointed out. "How do you *know* all this stuff?"

"You think poetry class is just for impressing people?" Toph smirked. "Poems get all kinds of stuff told. And I kind of doubt Fire Nation pirates ever came with," she scrunched her face in concentration, "*Sails blue as deadly ice, howling as a blizzard, leaving winter in their wake.*"

"The Lay of Lan Hsi," Xiu blurted out. "I always thought he was just a cynical court poet. I mean, the Water Tribe's always been friendly to Kyoshi Island, and we're Earth Kingdom."

"Had to be friendly," Toph smirked. "They fenced a lot of their loot with you guys."

Xiu eyed her, not friendly. "You're not a proper young lady, are you?"

"Not if I can help it."

"Anyway," Sadao said hastily, trying to head off disaster, "the- Uncle is right. We used to have all kinds of water clans. Marsh clans, river clans, swamp clans... wave and mountain. That's who we used to be. And the *waegu* were pretty bad."

"The who what?" Sokka frowned.

"Water brigands," Lee filled in. "Pirates."

"History says they raided the Eastern Continent for decades," Sadao admitted. "They raided the rest of us, too, but that's what great names are for. Mostly, they only hit weak domains, and, well..." He shrugged. "You get together and fight, or you leave for a lord who will protect you. That's the way it was. Then."

"And the Fire Lord didn't try to stop these guys?" Sokka snorted.

Mushi's smile turned even milder, and Xiu winced. *Oh, damn. I don't know what he set up, kid, but you just walked right into it.*

"There was no Fire Lord," Mushi stated. "Not as you know them."

Xiu choked. "No Fire Lord?"

"It used to be only the title of the leader of the Fire Sages. Who served the Avatar." Mushi's smile never wavered.

Served the Avatar. Served the- Xiu felt faint.

"Uncle would know more about that than the rest of us," Sadao confessed. "But from what I learned in school, that's right. We weren't always a united nation. Just a bunch of feuding clans in the care of the great names." He swallowed dryly. "So when the Earth King kept sending messengers to us about the pirates... We didn't have a king. The pirates weren't the people of *any* loyal lord. The great names kept telling them that."

Mushi lifted a hand slightly. "I would only add that there were, in truth, one or two of the great names who did harbor the *waegu*. We were not all blameless. But the Earth King demanded of us that we hunt them down and destroy them, utterly. And that, no one had the authority to do." He

nodded, yielding the story back to Sadao.

"There was no warning," Sadao said quietly. "There just... usually, when a hurricane hits, people can feel the way the wind shifts. Watch the birds, the animals. It's not much, but even a day to get people away from the water-" He shuddered. "The scrolls say one moment the sky was clear. The next, the storm was on us."

"Kyoshi walked on the wind, and threw down lightning," Lee said levelly. "She came for the pirates, and she showed no mercy." Fingers curled, white-knuckled. "And she got them."

"But a storm like that isn't just wind and rain," Sadao nodded. "It - it pushes the sea ahead of it. High as a tsunami, sometimes. This one was bad. Worse than any storm in the records. The waves were topping forty feet! And maybe that doesn't sound like much to you, but- Spirits, do you know how many islands aren't even *thirty* feet high?"

Xiu shook her head, trying to deny what she was hearing. *No. Oma and Shu, no.*

"You can still see the high-water mark in Byakko, where the storm surge shoved boulders up," Teruko said grimly. "Our clan only came off as good as we did because we're a mountain clan. Shirotona's one oni of a big one, and it broke the storm's force. For some of us."

"Scrolls I found said Kyoshi was taught by a mountain firebender," Lee stated. "Maybe she didn't know the wave clans. Maybe she had no idea how many of us she was going to kill. But she brought the storm. And we died."

"Her storm swept over the whole nation," Sadao said bleakly. "The best estimates... no one really knows. Maybe two hundred thousand deaths. Most historians think it was a lot more."

"The wave clans were eviscerated," Mushi said levelly. "And with them we lost much. Firebending was not one style, centuries ago. It was many. Every domain had their own, sharpening it against their neighbors. And as all great names were equal in dignity, so all styles had respect, and no one was acclaimed the sole and best." He paused. "Until the Avatar decreed otherwise."

"Avatar Kyoshi declared we had brought this on ourselves, by harming her people," Sadao stated, eyes grim. "And so she wouldn't have to ever come back, she decreed that the Fire Lord, the most powerful of all firebenders, touched by Agni himself, would now rule all the domains. The Fire Lord would be responsible for his people. *All* of them. Even the worst criminals." His gaze slid sideways, toward Lee. "Only an exile is outside that authority. By the Avatar's own words." Sadao shook his head. "Kyoshi only set foot in our nation for one day... and we were lost."

"People petitioned her for the rest of her life to take it back," Lee said bitterly. "Her answers on record pretty much fall into *no, no*, and *hell no*. When she died? The whole Fire Nation was drunk for a week. And then we got Roku. Who looked at the world and said, hey, everything's fine, I'm not going to change *anything*." Flames blazed from clenched fists, blooming and fading like venomous flowers. "Damn you! Damn *all* of you! People saw the war coming! They tried to stop it! But the *Avatar* said everything was just *perfect*, while my people were going *insane*!"

It can't be true. Xiu could barely hear herself think over her own heartbeat. *It can't be.*

"So when people like your sister tell the Avatar he's their hope, when the other nations cheer that the Avatar has returned - we *remember*, Sokka. We remember Kyoshi ripped the heart from us in *one day*. And she *didn't even mean to do it*." Lee's lips curled; a snarl, that had nothing human in it. "Just like Aang. Never. Wants. To hurt. *Anyone*."

Teruko's eyes narrowed, and she reached a hand through shimmering air to rest on Lee's shoulder. "Breathe, sir. Just breathe."

"So." Mushi looked from Sokka to Hakoda, with a glance of sympathy for Xiu. "Now you know. Kyoshi came, she destroyed, and she left, never lingering to see what she had wrought. Denying, for the rest of her life, the deaths we claimed; for as she swore, only criminals and outcasts lived in fetid, trackless swamps." He sighed. "Perhaps those of the Earth Kingdom could have mourned their losses, changed their lives, and moved on. But we are fire. *We fight*. And that we could not fight her, that we could not save the lives of those who had done nothing save live in the path of Kyoshi's fury... it has festered in us, ever since." Another searching glance. "As I have tried to tell your daughter, Chief Hakoda... yes, much of what the Fire Nation has done this past century is evil. And I believe the war should end. But the roots of that evil lie in pain. The pain of the mountain clans for their lost cousins of the sea. The pain of parents, knowing they are helpless to defend their children should the Avatar choose to punish us again." He looked straight at Hakoda. "The pain of children crying for mothers lost, and abandoned by those sworn to protect them."

Hakoda rocked back, eyes narrowed. "Let me guess," he said darkly. "Not a threat. Just a *warning*."

Mushi inclined his head. "I pray you will take it so."

"Then why help at all?" Hakoda said bluntly.

"Because I'm an idiot," Lee managed, fists finally loosening. "He's *twelve*. He was raised by *monks*. He doesn't know what people are like. How much damage he can do. How easy it is to hurt people. With bending. With fists. With *words*. And he doesn't know what he doesn't know." He glanced at Sokka, then back to Hakoda. "Your son is an honorable and determined opponent. You taught him. *You* are an honorable opponent. You've fought our nation without bending. Without waiting for the Avatar. Without trying to use him for your own ends, like everyone else on the *planet*." Lee blew out a breath, just slightly steaming. "You're Katara's father. And he listens to Katara." He swallowed. "Please."

An injured child, Xiu realized. A twelve-year-old Lee was healing... *The Avatar is here?*

"I've lost my wife to your war," Hakoda said tautly. "I've lost men I knew, and trusted. To *you*."

"When someone boards my ship to kill my men, I don't just let it happen," Lee said quietly. "You're risking that Captain Jee will hold the truce and not call in rest of the navy to wipe out your fleet. *I'm* risking that you're willing to teach Aang to be responsible. To *think* before he shoves people off a cliff." He shook himself, as if casting away hope. "Spirits, if an Avatar's going to kill my people, at least let it not be an *accident*."

Silence stretched between them. Xiu shivered in the wind.

"We'll think about what you've said," Hakoda said at last.

Lee inclined his head, gracious as a noble.

And he probably is, Xiu realized, as Toph silently joined a shell-shocked Sokka. "Who *are* you?" the weaver blurted out.

Lee smiled wryly. "Trust me. You don't want to know."

He might be right, Xiu admitted to herself, as the four of them headed back into camp. Fire Nation, after all. When had any of them been anything beyond misery and pain to her people? "They were

lying, right?" She barely recognized her own voice, hurt and desperate. "Kyoshi wouldn't..."

"They weren't lying," Toph said quietly.

"Which doesn't mean it's all true," Sokka said, determined. "It was centuries ago. Nobody's still alive from then. If they know it out of books - books can lie too, right?"

"You get me to Byakko, I can tell you if Teruko's lying about her rocks," Toph said practically.

"Til then? My mom used to read me old jokes about Kyoshi kicking out Fire Nation messengers. Want to know one of the punch lines?" She grimaced. *"Too bad the sea didn't get the rest of them."*

Oh, spirits, Xiu thought. Not funny.

"Sergeant Huizhong," Hakoda nodded as they approached the caravan. "Are we agreed?"

"We'll tell the Army your news," Huizhong said formally. "Given its critical nature, we'll leave as soon as possible." He bowed respectfully to the chief, and held out a hand.

Grateful, Xiu took it, and followed.

"Are you all right?" her boyfriend asked quietly, as they headed for her mount.

"I'm not sure I'll ever be all right again," Xiu admitted. *I thought I knew her. I thought I knew my own people.* "Huizhong... where would I find books on Avatar Kyoshi?"

"Besides Ba Sing Se University?" Huizhong said wryly. "I'll ask the general's aide. He knows stuff like that." He studied her as they walked. "Did they hurt you?"

"No," Xiu whispered. And squeezed his hand tighter. "They didn't hurt me."

They just broke my heart.

Chapter End Notes

In regard to "divine right" in the Fire Nation and Avatar Kyoshi's actions in regard to the Fire Lord... in this AU, divine right adheres to all the great names (daimyo).

Zuko's listing of Aang's injuries - check out "keraunomedicine" in Wikipedia. Lightning is nasty.

Iroh and Jee's bit to Teruko last chapter? Trust me, that wasn't singing praises. That was a warning. From what I've read, there is nothing harder to keep alive under fire than a smart young officer. The slower ones, you can maneuver out of the worst danger. Smart ones think up plans nobody would consider, and then jump into executing them without double-checking whether a more experienced person would actually do what they're about to pull off.

Munkh Khukh Tengri - Eternal Blue Sky. The Mongol religion of Tengriism is still practiced along with Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia and a few other areas, and seems a reasonably good fit with people who have sky bison (the religion itself has the "wind horse" as an image of the soul, among other aspects).

Some example of the devastation of floods and tidal waves: 1642 in China, 300,000 deaths. 1887, Huang He River China, 900,000 deaths. 1931, Huang He River China, 3.7 million deaths. As for hurricanes and cyclones, on November 13, 1970, Bangladesh had 300,000 deaths; several other events there have killed people in the ten thousand to two hundred thousand range. Given the Fire Nation is all islands... oh, yeah.

A reviewer brought up that, being an island nation, the Fire Nation really ought to be balanced between fire and water, not just fire. Yes. Exactly. Asia is full of "aquatic civilizations"; people who live in, manage, and harvest wetlands. We see one river community in "The Painted Lady", but it's obviously in bad shape. There should be more. A lot more. There should be people of the marshes, the swamps, the rivers; there should be people living on boats. They're not there.

There has to be a reason for that.

Also, given the Fire Nation is the dragons' homeland, and I imagine hatchlings spit sparks, it's most likely a fire ecology. Which also fits with wetlands. Most wetlands burn. On a regular, natural basis. And there are plenty of "subtropical forest" type of environments that do the same; check out the longleaf pine ecosystem of the American Southeast. Never mind the volcanoes; the whole Fire Nation probably goes up in flames on a timescale ranging from once a decade to once a year.

Fire ecologies are dynamic equilibriums. They have lots of disturbances; hurricanes, lightning, and fire being some of the most common. But over the long term and large scale, they are stable. Somewhere is burning; somewhere has just burned; somewhere will burn, soon.

If the people reflect the land, and their element... there is no way the Fire Nation would be an absolute monarchy. What they should be is a swarm of competing clans, going to war with each other on a regular basis. Aggression turned inward, not out.

And yes, in situations like that, you get pirates. Lots of them. Historically, the wako (waegu) of Japan raided all up and down the coast of China for well over a century under just those circumstances. The Emperor was not happy.

Canonically, Avatars are prone to overkill. And Kyoshi in specific seems to have had a short fuse. "How dare you defy your Avatar", indeed. And splitting off a whole island? What are the odds Chin was the only person killed, when Avatar-powered earthbending cut through miles of forest and farmland?

So. My take, in this AU, of the "darkest day in Fire Nation history". The hurricane came and went over a lot longer, but in those eight minutes, when Agni could not help... Kyoshi created the rule of the Fire Lord.

One of the scariest phrases, ever? It seemed like a good idea at the time.

There's one other thing about fire ecologies. Sooner or later, they will burn. And the longer fire is excluded, the worse the destruction.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sokka sat in the new tent they'd put up over Aang, breathing in familiar scents of furs and lamp oil, and tried not to think.

Zuko's got a reason for chasing us.

He didn't want to believe it. He really, really didn't. But he'd seen Aang in the desert, rampaging away until Katara brought him back to earth. And Roku in the temple. And heard about Kyoshi's lethal dealings with Chin from... well, *her*.

"What kind of Avatar says 'Oops'?"

Aang did. Oh. Man.

Toph was checking Aang's pulse again, as Katara got broth ready for the next time Aang woke up. Both of them seemed steady as a rock. Katara was actually humming, stroking Momo as he clung to her shoulder.

The Fire Nation's got a reason for wanting Aang dead.

It scared him. In a way even staring into the face of an invasion fleet hadn't. What the heck was he supposed to *do*?

"Copper for your thoughts, Snoozles?"

"I... how can you be so calm?" Sokka burst out. "After what they said?"

Humming stopped, and Katara rolled her eyes, Momo peeking past her. "What did Zuko say this time?"

"Wasn't Zuko. More Uncle, and some other firebenders. And, tell you when Aang wakes up," Toph said decisively. "It's about Kyoshi. He ought to have a say." She shrugged. "Sokka, people don't do things without a reason. Maybe not a good one, all the time. But they've usually got one. The Fire Nation kept hunting Aang when no one'd seen the Avatar for a hundred years? *Nobody* does that without a really, really *important* reason." She frowned. "And one of those poems always kind of bugged me. Talked about an air monk dropping in on Omashu to tell the king not to worry, Roku kicked Sozin's invasion back out."

"But the Air Nomads were dead," Katara objected. "And so was Roku."

"Unless going after the Air Temples wasn't Sozin's first try," Sokka thought out loud.

"Gee, why would that not surprise me," Katara snorted.

Sokka opened his mouth to protest... and shut it again, sighing. He wasn't up to arguing with Katara. Not until he'd sorted things out in his own head. "Toph. When Iroh was talking to those guys about Aang not being the enemy-"

"What?" Katara interrupted. "How could you let him say that? They're Fire Nation!"

"Yeah, they are. But they're soldiers," Toph pointed out. "That means they follow orders. Like holding Captain Jee's truce, right now." She cocked her head at Katara. "So if Aang takes out Fire Lord Ozai - what if the next Fire Lord offers a truce?"

"Which would kind of be the smart thing to do, if Aang's on our side," Sokka nodded.

"You got it. Uncle wants the war to stop, too," Toph stated. "But how's it gonna, if people like Teruko think Aang wants *them* dead? Not just the Fire Lord, but the whole Fire Nation? Think about it."

"Aang never wants anybody dead," Katara frowned. "He's too nice."

"Trust me, *nice* is not what the Fire Nation thinks Aang is," Sokka said soberly. "So you think Iroh's trying to-?" He couldn't quite find the words.

"He's trying to tell them that maybe the war *could* stop," Toph said practically. "That's kind of a new idea. Scary. But if they listen, then maybe when Aang goes in and we *win*, they'll stop fighting." She lifted eyebrows at Sokka. "Think that's worth keeping quiet for?"

"Yeah." Sokka grinned suddenly, some of that nebulous fear of *we might lose Dad again* slipping away. "Thanks."

"No problem." Toph's head jerked up. "Hey!"

"Uh..."

Sokka didn't think; just dove for his best friend with the rest of them.

"Ow..."

"Give him some room," Katara directed, carefully propping Aang up on his side. "Hey. You're back."

"Bad dream," Aang whispered, still not opening his eyes. His hand brushed fur, before Momo nestled under it and chittered. "Bato? No... he went to join up with your dad, didn't he...?"

"You know he did," Katara said, startled. "Aang, that was months ago."

"Zuko said he'd be confused." Sokka frowned. "That lightning kind of... rips up channels in the body, like flooding a field."

"Zuko?" Aang blinked at him, just barely. "We haven't seen him since the desert. Have we?"

Sokka raised a finger to lecture, then paused to think. Come to think of it, in all that mess, when *would* Aang have had a chance to see Zuko in the palace? "You had a vision, we headed back to Ba Sing Se, we found Toph...?"

"A vision?" Aang shook his head a little, and winced. "I thought it was a bad dream... had to be..."

"You know, sometimes if you tell someone about it, it helps," Katara encouraged him.

Aang scrunched his eyes shut. "You were in it."

"Because of what Zuko did," Katara said grimly.

"No... Zuko wasn't there..." Aang gathered his courage, and looked at her. "It was you, and Azula,

and you were... it was stupid." He smiled faintly. Winced again, coughing.

"Here." Katara helped shaking hands get broth down. "It's okay. We're all fine. With Dad."

"Seemed so real..."

"Might not be a dream," Toph said thoughtfully. "You guys and Azula and the Dai Li were really going at it, before you got hit."

"Uh-uh." Gray eyes lost focus as he smiled up at Katara. "I know you'd never do that. You'd freeze her, you'd stop her, but you'd never... you *know* death's not the answer..."

"I know *what*?" Katara choked.

"...Make a good airbender..." Eyes sliding shut, Aang leaned against her.

Sokka eyed his slack-jawed sister, and Aang's slow breathing, and stepped in to ease his friend back under the furs. Momo's ears drooped, but the lemur seemed to sigh, curling back up near Aang's head. "Let's let him sleep," Sokka said. "It's good for him, right?"

Katara nodded, eyes still wide. "He thinks... but..."

"He thinks you weren't trying to kill Princess Crazy," Toph said bluntly. "Boy, is he in for a rude wake-up call."

"Toph," Sokka frowned.

"What? Twinkletoes thinks your sister's the next best thing to a good updraft. She's all about positive reinforcement; I guess that is like an airbender. And airbenders *don't kill*."

"But- she was trying to-" Katara sputtered.

"I'm not complaining," Toph said bluntly. "She tried to fry me, I'd take her out too." Blind eyes looked lost. "I don't like to think about it. I've felt it when things go wrong in a rumble. When people get hurt. I don't *want* to. But if it was Azula, or you guys - yeah, I'd take her down."

"But Aang never wants to hurt anyone," Sokka muttered, uneasy. The pure, feral rage he'd seen on Zuko's face when he'd said that - a fury he'd never seen on the firebender in *any* battle, even when the Avatar had been tossing men like matchsticks...

No. He had seen it. Once.

"No matter. Sooner or later... he has to come out."

Sokka remembered it like yesterday, instead of almost half a year ago. Zhao's smirk, and the incandescent rage as Zuko had struggled against steel chains, helpless as the rest of them on the winter solstice-

Zuko was fighting. But he couldn't break the chains, Sokka realized, taken aback. Not until after Roku... seared the chains off of us. "Roku helped Zuko."

"What?" Katara looked at him as if he'd lost his mind.

"On the solstice," Sokka said soberly. "Not as much as he helped us, but he did. He could have left Zuko there, or broken up the temple so he had to end up back in Zhao's lap. But he didn't. He gave Zuko just enough help so he could break loose. Why did he do that?" Sokka eyed Toph directly.

"Why's Zuko asking Dad to look after Aang, if all he wants to do is drag him off to Ozai?"

"Because he's a lying, evil firebender," Katara shrugged. "You know he's only helping Aang to save his own skin. And theirs." She jerked her head toward the bay. "He knows what I can do to them, anytime Dad says the truce is over."

"You better not. Not while Uncle's still standing," Toph said soberly. "I can take Zuko, if we have to. Uncle? No way. Not if someone really ticked him off."

"You and General How!" Katara flung up her hands. "Do you believe he wanted to send a whole army after their teashop? And he told them to kill Iroh if they couldn't grab him?"

Sokka felt a chill down his spine, and saw his own alarm on Toph's face. "Katara?" he managed, grateful his voice didn't squeak. "Do us all a favor. Don't say that around Zuko."

"Why not? It's not like it's an *insult*," Katara said sarcastically. "If he can call me a thief and get away with it, we can tell *him* the truth." She frowned at him, worried. "Come on, Sokka. We've seen Zuko mad before."

"No," Sokka muttered under his breath. "I'm not sure we have." He sighed. "Let's just keep everybody calm for a few more days. Let Zuko handle the lightning-mess in Aang's head... What?"

His sister grimaced. "It's just hard to believe Zuko knows what he's doing."

"Maybe you should watch us bend sand sometime," Toph smirked.

"Bend *what*?" Sokka wasn't sure which of them yelled it. Though it was definitely him that went on, "I thought - glassy rock, you-"

"Zuko doesn't bend like other firebenders," Toph said plainly. "He's figured something out. It's part of how he heals. And it's got a lot in common with metalbending." Another smirk. "It's not easy, but if he can find fire in something? Like I can find earth in metal? He can move it."

"He can move hot sand?" Katara rolled her eyes, and went back to fussing with Aang's furs. "I'm so impressed."

What, did you think Toph lost Appa to sandbenders because they were easy to beat? Sokka almost said. And stopped, before the first words could leave his mouth. *Appa. Moving things that aren't fire. And he was a healer in Ba Sing Se. With a license.* "He's Lee."

"Come on!" Katara said impatiently. "Toph told us he was a..." Words died on her lips.

"A Fire Nation waterbender Amaya was training to heal," Sokka finished. "If he can move stuff that's hot - he can move *hot water*." He swallowed. *Amaya knew. She had to know. Why? So what if he can heal; he's Fire Nation!* "Toph, why?"

"Because we needed help," Toph shot back, just as blunt. "He knew where Appa was, and he knew what Long Feng was going to do, and he *asked*, Sokka. He asked me to help him get Aang out of Ba Sing Se, so it wouldn't be the North Pole all over again."

"You lied to us?" Katara recoiled.

"What part of *we needed help* did you not get?" Toph said impatiently. "They were hiding in the middle of Ba Sing Se; they were *dead* if they were caught! General How? *Not* joking! If he'd had a chance to kill Uncle, he would have!" She swung her head toward Sokka. "Zuko knew that, and he

went down into Dai Li headquarters anyway. To help us help Aang. And yeah, a lot of why he did it was so Aang wouldn't kill lots of Fire Nation people. He's a *prince*. He's got to think of things like that. But part of why he did it? To *help us*." Toph took a breath. "'Cause crazy as it sounds, Katara... he wants to believe in Aang, too."

"Are you kidding?" Sokka said in disbelief. "After what they said about Kyoshi?"

"Will someone tell me what they said about her?" Katara said impatiently.

"Long story. If it's true, and I think it is - worst day *ever*." Toph shrugged. "I said he *wants* to, Sokka. Zuko knows a lot of stuff he wants is never going to happen." Her voice turned sour. "Like Aang figuring out that gee, Azula really wants to kill us, and maybe we're gonna have to kill her right back."

"Of course Aang knows that," Katara insisted. "He's going to kill the Fire Lord."

"No." Sokka's heart sank. "He's going to *face* the Fire Lord. That's what he always says. Face him. Stop him." He winced. "Aang's never said kill."

"But he has to," Katara insisted. "We have to finish the Fire Nation. We have to bring balance back to the world. No one else can do it!"

"Why?" Sokka said, half to himself. He was close to something, he knew it. Like that moment he and Ji the Mechanist had shared, staring at each other over the stench of a rotten egg.

"Why?" Katara glared at him, disbelieving. "Did you lose the last century somewhere? They murdered the Air Nomads, attacked the Earth Kingdom, invaded the North Pole, and oh, let's not forget, they *killed Mom!*"

"That's - not what I meant," Sokka managed, hurting inside. *Mom. I miss you. A lot.* "I mean, why does it have to be Aang?" He looked over them all. "Why can't it be us?"

"Go, Snoozles," Toph murmured, grinning.

"No disrespect to Boomerang, but you're not even a bender," Katara said practically. "How would you take on the Fire Lord?"

"The same way Zuko tracks us," Sokka stated, determined. "Using my head. Zuko's not a problem because he's a bender-"

"Were you even in the Spirit Oasis?" Katara interrupted. "Or did I just imagine all that fire coming my way?"

"That's not the point," Sokka argued. "He could have been one guy with blasting jelly. Or too many soldiers for you to freeze. The point is, how did he even get there?"

"By being really sneaky," Toph said bluntly. "He's good at it."

"Sneaky and evil. What a surprise." Katara rolled her eyes.

"Zhao was pretty evil," Sokka shrugged, "But I wouldn't ever call him sneaky." He pointed at Toph. "And you know something."

"Not exactly *know*," Toph said thoughtfully. "It's something I figured out. Playing with sand with Sparky."

"Would you stop calling him that?" Katara demanded. "You make him sound like a friend!"

"He *is* a friend," Toph said seriously. "He took a hit from Ty Lee for me. *On purpose*. Maybe he calls that an ally, but honestly? I trust him." She crossed her arms. "And maybe he's not the best firebender out there, but Zuko's learned something I just wish I could pound into Aang's head. He *pays attention* to other elements." She whipped her head toward Sokka. "When's the last time you paid attention to fire?"

"Um - ah - huh?" Sokka managed.

"Let me back up." Toph frowned. "Did Bato tell you about that whole High War and Low War bit?"

"Sometimes they fight straight out, sometimes they sneak?" Sokka shrugged.

"Pretty much," Toph nodded. "Did you know fire can burn underground?"

"It can?" Sokka said blankly. "How? There's nothing there *to* burn, it's all-" He halted, jaw dropping.

"The ground isn't frozen here, is it?" Katara shook her head, stunned. "It's not just thawed pretty deep. It's really not frozen?"

"You got it." Toph puffed a black strand out of her face. "People think about fires on the surface. They miss that sometimes, it just burns into the ground. Goes through tree roots, coal veins... all kinds of things. And it smolders in there, and inches past where you think it's safe - and maybe weeks later, it blows back up, and there's trouble all over the place." She nodded at Sokka. "You're right. Zuko's not dangerous 'cause he's a firebender. Though it helps. He's trouble because he's *fire*. Not the straightforward, blast furnace stuff. That little ember that hangs in there, waiting, keeping it together until he can get one good shot." She paused. "And he's not the Avatar, either."

Katara rocked back on her heels, defeated. "So that's it. We can't ever trust them. Any of them."

"That's not what I said," Toph insisted.

"I know," Katara said quietly. "But you've lied for them before."

Toph blanched.

"Aang's lied to us a couple times, too," Sokka pointed out, thinking of a crumpled map, and Zuko hunting them by a lost necklace. "Sorry, Toph. I get why you did it. And I guess it came out all right. And maybe Zuko's not such a bad guy... as long as he's helping you. But we've got a bigger problem than I thought, and I'm not sure how to help Aang out with this one. The Fire Nation teaches *everyone* to fight. If all the women fight - how can we ever trust them to talk the men out of starting the war again?"

Toph buried her face in her hands. "We're talking the same language, I swear... so why do I feel like when we say *truce*, none of us means the same thing?"

"A truce is a truce," Katara frowned. "Women decide they've had enough fighting and come to drag their husbands home. Or our men tell the other men that they're going to, and no guy wants to be embarrassed like that..." She looked aside, and grudgingly admitted, "Or the men decide they've got to take a break and patch each other up before they start hacking again. Though I don't know how Dad's trusting them to do that."

Toph was silent. Lifted her hands, raising a block of stone from sand. Hit it with her head, crumbling it back into bits. Raised it again, and hit it again.

"Toph?" Sokka said, worried.

"...*Argh*." A scrunch of fingers, and shards dissolved back into sand. "No *wonder* Zuko thinks you're all crazy."

"He's the one who's crazy!" Katara objected.

"Wait." Sokka frowned. "Toph? What's a Fire Nation truce?"

"Til today? I thought I knew. Now? Not sure." Toph growled under her breath. "And now I'm kind of wondering what *Aang* means by truce... In the Earth Kingdom? Women don't get a say. It's the nobles and the generals who say when people are going to stop fighting. And they don't stop just because someone's *had enough*. Either their army's really hurt, and they've got to pull men out - or the enemy's *crushed*."

And that was earth. Sokka tried to take Toph's advice, and think about that with fire. And swallowed. He'd heard Zuko talk about reclaiming his honor. Who hadn't? And he'd added that to the sheer number of times they'd bumped heads with the firebender, and the fact that, charcoaled villages aside, no one *ever* got burned, really...

I screwed up. Oh man, did I ever. "Hunting Aang's not about honor, is it? Because if it was - we keep *embarrassing* him. We even tied him up and rescued him off the ice! He owes us his *life*. That'd wipe out any honor he could win by beating us, *ever*."

Toph whistled. "You get honor by fighting?"

Sokka choked. Earth Rumble *champion*, best fighting bender he'd ever seen besides Katara, and... "You mean you *don't*?"

Toph flung up her arms. "Hello? Little blind helpless merchant daughter, remember? I'm supposed to honor my family by respecting my parents, *never* shaming them, and marrying whatever guy they want to build an alliance with when I'm old enough. Doesn't matter that I never wanted any of it. There's only a couple ways I could bring more dishonor on my parents than doing what I'm doing now. And they're all ugly." For a moment, she looked like she wanted to cry. "I *told* you. I gave up *everything* to come teach Aang!"

"But... he's the Avatar," Katara said, stunned. "He's the most important person in the world."

"Not to my parents," Toph said bluntly.

"Well, we already knew your parents were-" Katara cut herself off.

"My parents are what?" Toph challenged.

"I'm sure they were just worried about you," Katara reassured her. "Your bending's really surprising."

"You think my parents are selfish," Toph said, dead level.

"I didn't say that," Katara started.

"But you would have," Toph stated. "Anybody else, you would have. 'Cause that's what you really

think. Anybody who doesn't help Aang, the most *important* person in the whole *world*, is selfish." Her toes dug into sand, blind green eyes scrunched and angry.

No way is this going to end well, Sokka winced. "Selfish or not, doesn't matter," he said bluntly. "Everybody who's not helping, is one more person we need to get around to end the war." He looked straight at Katara. "And everybody who is helping, makes it shorter. Doesn't matter why they're doing it."

Katara planted her fists on her hips, eyes narrowed-

"No," Sokka said soberly, before she could even start. "You can't have it both ways, Katara. You can't say you want the war to stop, *and* you want everybody helping Aang because they *want* to. We don't have time. *Aang* doesn't have time. We've got two months before the eclipse, and we're not going to get any help from the Earth King. We're going to have to make a new plan, and find anybody we can who *will* help. *Anybody*."

Katara glared at him. "So you'd take Zuko?"

Sokka's jaw dropped. "Are you crazy?" he managed. "Sure, we could use another healer. People are going to get hurt." *And you're going to be right in the middle of it; who's going to help if you get hurt?* "But he's the Fire Lord's son. If Iroh wouldn't even teach Aang firebending to go up against his little brother - come on, Katara. I just want Zuko here long enough to make sure Aang's okay. That's all." He held out empty hands. "You know I wouldn't do that to you, or Dad. What's wrong?"

"...You just both seem to like him." Katara glanced away.

"I do like him," Toph said bluntly. "He's got rock down pretty good, for a firebender. But he knows I'm on your side." She smiled a little. "That's kind of what I like about him."

"I don't *like* him," Sokka stated. "I just... I understand him, a little. Which is kind of weird, but..." He waved his hands, trying to put it into words. "He followed us all the way from the South Pole. He was in Ba Sing Se, just like us. He's... it's crazy, but I kind of feel better with him here. If he's the guy after Aang, we know what kinds of things he'll try. And we know what he *won't* do." Sokka blew out a breath. "All the time he's been chasing us? All the people he's fought to get to Aang? Nobody died, Katara. Nobody."

"That's not what Asiavik says."

Blindsided, Sokka shook his head. "What?" Why would the fleet's herb-healer say that? "Zuko's been chasing us since winter. The closest he's come to the fleet is almost running into Bato-"

"If that's what he told you, he's lying. Again." Katara's eyes were hard. "He's killed people, Sokka. He's killed *our* people."

"Yeah. *Before* he found Aang, and after your guys boarded him," Toph said bluntly. "Your dad mentioned it."

"And you *like* him?" Katara demanded.

"Hey, I like Aang, too," Toph shrugged. "And I've heard what he did at the North Pole."

"That's not the same, and you know it!"

"No. It's not," Sokka said flatly. "But if we end the war the way Aang wants us to - take out the

Fire Lord, and get everybody else to surrender - there's going to be a *lot* of Fire Nation people left who killed somebody." He sighed. "Nobody's asking you to like Zuko. Spirits, go ahead and hate his guts! Just - if he's Lee, he trained with Amaya." And she'd claimed him as part of her tribe. Crazy. *Trained* healing, Katara. Even if he's doing it with fire. So can you listen to him tell you how he's healing Aang? Even if you hate him? So you can do it later?"

Katara bit her lip, looking down. "I don't like it." She sighed. "But for Aang? Of course I can do it."

Sokka smiled, relieved. And tried to hang onto that smile, as realization turned his guts to knots.

The worst day ever. And they couldn't protect themselves.

The darkest day in Fire Nation history. He'd bet on it. Which meant when they used the solar eclipse so Aang could face the Fire Lord-

It's going to be Avatar Kyoshi all over again. They're going to be madder than a swarm of vulture-hornets.

Not that he cared how mad the Fire Nation got. Not if the war *stopped*. But if Aang couldn't kill Fire Lord Ozai...

We'd better get this right the first time.

By the end of summer. Watching Zuko run through cold katas to mend tattered patience, Asahi curled in a feathery lump nearby, Iroh tried not to frown. He'd promised Toph he would not ask what Roku had said about Aang facing Ozai. He'd never promised not to speculate.

Sozin's Comet, the eclipse, or something only the spirits know of, the retired general judged. *If the spirits choose to warn us, we will learn of the last in time, or not. If it is one of the others...*

Sozin's Comet would affect the entire world. There was nothing he or Zuko could do to prepare for an angry Avatar on that day that they would not already be doing. The eclipse, though... that was quite another matter.

If the Fire Sages have calculated correctly, the effects of sun-shadow should reach from a bit east of Omashu, west through the very heart of the Fire Nation, Iroh recalled. *Ba Sing Se is too far west to be affected, and our chosen sanctuaries too far north. We should be fine.*

But the Fire Nation might not be.

Eight minutes, Iroh knew. *And Ozai's commanders should know when it is coming. Aang is not Kyoshi; he cannot even have mastered earthbending yet. And there has been no one to teach him fire.*

Still. Even if the Avatar's training was incomplete, his friends might well make the difference. Sokka, Katara, Toph; all had proven themselves against warriors. And while Chief Hakoda's fleet could only harry the Fire Navy as a whole, give it one defined *target*, and the man could cause incredible damage.

They would have a chance, Iroh judged. *Not a good chance... but my nephew has faced worse odds, and lived.*

Though never without a cost. And that, Iroh feared. Aang was young, and even now, frighteningly innocent. Should the Avatar lose someone he cared for in such a rash assault, even if it should succeed...

Iroh winced, all too able to picture that blind rage. *So. If they have such plans... what should we do?*

Little they *could* do, for now, he feared. His nephew's previous letter to Sokka had been worse than ignored, from the evidence.

Yet if what Zuko tells me of this healing is accurate, Aang should be coherent soon. Within a day; two, at most. If we can arrange to speak with him, directly-

Teruko cleared her throat. "Sir? Just thought you'd like to know Lieutenant Sadao is back on the *Suzuran*."

That was definitely a hint of relief, under the professional calm. Iroh raised an eyebrow. "I take it this simplifies your duties, Lieutenant?"

"Ah. Sir. Well." She hesitated, then sighed. "General. Sadao's competent, he listens to the captain, and he always tries to do right by the ship and her people." She paused. "And he lives convinced that somebody's going to forget a bolt in a trebuchet, and it'll collapse on top of him."

"Has one?" Iroh asked mildly.

Teruko hesitated. "Don't think I ever asked, sir. But it's not trebuchets specifically. He's nervous about *everything*." She waved a hand toward the camp. "And in the middle of this..."

Indeed. A nervous firebender, in the midst of a fragile truce? Unwise. "Perhaps we will be fortunate, and my nephew will have time to share tales of misery," Iroh smiled. "That might go far in easing his mind."

"The prince isn't nervous, sir."

Iroh chuckled at her polite confusion. "It is a matter of degree. Your fellow officer *fears* the world is trying to kill him. My nephew *knows* it is. And shapes his life accordingly."

"Polar ice tends to kill anyone, sir."

And if that wasn't a shy request for gossip, Iroh had never heard one. "It is a technique I developed decades ago, when I believed Fire Lord Azulon meant to mount another invasion of the Northern Water Tribe. Those plans never came to fruition, and I served in the Earth Kingdom instead. So I have taught the method to my family, but it does not seem to have reached the common style." He breathed deep, and *breathed*; not the roaring exhalation that had granted him his infamous nickname, but quick, shallow puffs of flame that were the only outward sign of breath lacing chi through blood to warm it. Reached out, and touched her hand.

Teruko's brows shot up; as well they might, at fingers suddenly fever-warm. "Sir, if you could show me that sometime... The prince is frost-proof?"

"One might better say, highly resistant," Iroh nodded. "It was still foolhardy and desperate, to try and infiltrate through ice. But as for *dealing* with ice, and other elements... My nephew expected to find and capture the *Avatar*. It is true, he is not the most skilled at facing firebenders. But against other benders? Of all our nation who have faced Aang, only two have truly given him a fight. My nephew... and Princess Azula." The retired general smirked, just a little, thinking of word brought

by certain contacts. "Admiral Zhao once had Aang cornered on a riverbank, without means of escape... and the airbender managed to dodge in such a fashion that Zhao defeated *himself*."

"Not the best firebender?" Teruko arched a brow right back at him, subtly nodding toward where Zuko was steadily working through ever more advanced katas. "I've never even seen some of those before."

Nor have I, Iroh admitted to himself. "But you have seen many of them," he said thoughtfully, watching her reactions as his nephew moved. "They are of Byakko, are they not? Which may have begun as a mountain clan... yet now preserves remnants of what was once much more."

"You need to speak to Lady Kotone about clan matters, sir." She bit her lip. "But I've never seen *Dragon Chases the Moon* anywhere else."

"Is that what it is called," Iroh murmured, watching Zuko shift weight from his bent-kneed right foot to angled, retreating left; hands circling softly clockwise to cross before the sea of chi and spread wide again. He could picture the deceptively gentle fire it would raise; not the aggressive blocks common to firebending, but a swirling shield that would use its own currents of heat to shunt blows aside. "It is like the fire-shield that saved his life in the explosion..." Iroh paused, considering that. "Byakko trains with fires on the field?"

"Sir?" Her eyes weren't quite guileless.

"With flames raised from chi alone, that move would be a skillful block," Iroh observed. "Add another source of fire to draw from... That is what it is meant for, is it not? Circling draws fire in; calls it, as a waterbender her wave, or an airbender his breeze."

"I'll have to take your word for that, sir. Most people don't know anything about airbenders."

Iroh gave her a sharp look. Watched her try not to sweat.

And turned away, far more lighthearted than he'd been in months. "We really must find a way for my nephew to visit his grandparents. They seem most fascinating people."

"Good idea, sir. There's just this little problem called the whole Fire Navy--"

Fire exploded.

Lieutenant Teruko was as good as Jee had trusted her to be, thank Agni; she was between Zuko and the fires suddenly blazing on *Suzuran* before his nephew even knew he'd dropped out of kata. "No, sir," the marine said firmly.

"But Captain Jee," Zuko protested.

"Can handle this. Sir." She gave him a level look. "He's not alone, Prince Zuko. Give Sadao a real fight, and he's steady as a rock."

Zuko swallowed, as more fire bloomed and faint cries were carried on the wind. "Just exactly what is *this*, Lieutenant?"

"Nothing I did not expect," Iroh said candidly. "Though not quite this soon. Still, the caravan means our time here will be measured in days, so perhaps now is wise."

"What?" Zuko demanded, face pale with worry. "What is *wise*?"

Iroh sighed. "Nephew. You are his commander. There is not a chance in the world that Captain Jee would allow you to board his ship without being certain of his crew's loyalty." He met Zuko's gaze squarely. "And there is only one way to do that." A heartbeat, and he gave his nephew a wry smile. "Court manners, Prince Zuko. We are likely to have concerned hosts, and we must seem blamelessly ignorant."

"Don't worry, sir," Teruko said dryly, as Zuko tried to master himself. "All we have to do is mention Sadao and some misplaced blasting jelly. It's not the first time."

"But our own crew-" Zuko cut himself off, knuckles white. "*Suzuran* has more sailors than the *Wani*. Sailors... loyal to the Fire Lord." He winced. "I'm sorry, Uncle. I didn't think it through."

"No, you did not," Iroh said severely. "And you must consider that, in our future plans. We will likely encounter many loyal first to Fire Lord Ozai, no matter what arguments we bring in our defense. And to think that we can dissuade them all without bloodshed... no." He gripped his nephew's shoulder, comforting. "We will spare those we can. But to defend the lives of our people - a great name must *never* hesitate."

Zuko nodded, taking that hardest of lessons to heart. Straightened, and took a steadying breath, ready to face approaching, angry blue.

Iroh arranged his own features into artful innocence, and mentally crossed his fingers. *Be alive, Captain. And be lucky.*

"Timely action, Lieutenant," Jee nodded, eyes still on the singed and furious - or, for some, despairing - faces of their prisoners. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to stall any company for a bit..."

"Yes, sir." A bow, and a still-smoldering Sadao left him with the rest of the marines, heading above to the open deck. Delaying, just for a moment, to pat the shoulder of disbelieving Cook Luchan, who was still cupping ashes that had been a significant portion of their flour supplies. Before it had suffered an unfortunate encounter with Jee's need for a distraction and Sadao's... unenviable talent.

Sniffing, the cook burst into tears.

No fresh noodles for a while, Jee sighed to himself, as one of Luchan's assistants led him gently away. *At least we have dried in storage... the prince's plan had better include how we're going to fund this madhouse. Sailors need to eat. Refugees, even more so.*

Well. At least they'd be cutting the roster by an even dozen. Frankly, Jee was a bit startled the numbers hadn't been higher. Bad enough he'd flatly told his crew the truth about their princes' status, and what he *didn't* intend to do about it. Add in Prince Zuko's... unexpected gift...

"A *waterbender*," Seaman Koki spat. "You'd serve a *mongrel* instead of the Fire Lord?"

"I will follow wherever Prince Zuko leads, rather than see my people and my country ground under the heel of a woman who deserves, for her cruelty, the fate her brother has suffered for his mercy," Jee said levelly. "Princess Azula is a *dragon-child*. Our schools may not teach what that means, anymore... but if you've ever listened at your grandmother's knee, you know what evil a dark dragon is capable of."

That drew nervous looks from a few of the prisoners. But not Koki. "I challenge you! Blade to blade!"

"I do not accept." Jee's voice was iron. "You have proven yourselves enemies, you were overpowered, and you were taken. And our princes are still in danger on shore. I will *not* leave their efforts to founder if one of you should chance to get in a lucky shot." He raised one gray brow, gaze fixed on the seaman's. "Once they are on board, I will be free to accept your challenge."

Koki opened his mouth... and slowly shut it again, thoughts of imperial firebenders - one of whom, Teruko's marines had gleefully spread the word, was a *swordsman* - evidently waking a belated impulse towards self-preservation.

Jee nodded slightly. "The twelve of you present a problem. I have a fair idea how Princess Azula would solve it... but I have no stomach for abandoning men loyal to our nation to the Water Tribe's mercy. You'll be confined to the brig until such time as we can put you ashore. I won't guarantee that landing will be safe, but it will not be in the hands of our enemies."

"Sir." Chains rattled on Sergeant Aoi; a good man, and one Jee wished he didn't have to lose. "They'll execute you all."

Jee met his gaze squarely. "That may be. But as the general has illustrated... they have to catch us first." Stepping back, he nodded at the marines. "Secure them below."

That tended to, he made his way up to where Sadao was glumly waving at a ship off their port bow, full of disgruntled warriors. "What did you tell them?" Jee asked in an undertone.

"Nothing," Sadao said, even more glum. "They haven't asked us anything."

"Good, that makes things easier." Jee smiled at the wooden ship and its suspicious crew. "We can be properly polite, and send Chief Hakoda a hawk."

"A hawk- oh." Sadao brightened. "I can-"

"Stay here, in case our visitors decide to ask questions after all," Jee said firmly. "I'm not of the chief's rank, but I'll have to do." Still smiling, he headed back to the aviary. Ostentatiously wrote a note - *shipboard dispute near flammables, handled now, our thanks for your understanding and forbearance* - and slipped it into the message cylinder of a hawk held by grizzled Seaman Saburo.

And slipped a second message into another hawk's keeping.

The general's hands, to Teruko's, to Sadao's, to mine, Jee thought soberly. *And now...* "This hawk needs to find a person or place in Ba Sing Se," Jee said plainly. "I have information that will hopefully allow that."

Saburo took the offered sheet of paper, read it over carefully, and nodded. "It'll do." He stroked the hawk he was holding. "Her flight to cover her sister's?"

"And soon, if possible," Jee nodded.

"A few minutes," Saburo said tersely. Hesitated, and looked his captain in the eye. "A *waterbender*, sir?"

"We came *that* close to meeting the Ocean personally," Jee said wryly, thumb and forefinger a hair's width apart. "Apparently Prince Zuko did meet the Moon."

"Heh. Like Temul," Saburo muttered.

"Temul of Shu Jing?" Jee frowned.

Saburo started. "You know the story, sir?"

"I know there *is* a story," Jee said honestly. "General Iroh used to correspond with Master Piandao on a regular basis. But he said the town preferred not to talk about old defeats."

"Some defeat!" Saburo snorted. "Days, she held 'em... took Fire Lord Sozin himself to... well." A sudden smile split his weather-worn face. "Guess we can tell that story, now."

Jee looked at him for a long, suspicious moment. "Just how many would-be rebels are there on my ship?"

"Clear and bright, sir?" Saburo said honestly. "*Suzuran's* where they sent *trouble*, Captain. There's Lieutenant Teruko an' a few more from Byakko; there's me and a couple handfuls from Shu Jing, there's a good fifteen or so from Onishi, you an' a few more from Nara... I hear folks from there still remember this quiet li'l tyke in the gold, finding poor lost lion-dogs." He shrugged. "Thought you knew our roster, sir. How else did you pull out Koki and his like before they could make a move?"

He hadn't even thought of domain backgrounds, Jee realized. He'd just gone down the crew's list one by one, winnowing out in advance those he thought most likely to hold to the Fire Lord. "Sadao's from the main island," Jee objected.

"Yes, sir," Saburo nodded. "Fire Lord Sozin's domain. And the prince is here."

Oh. Spirits, that made a frightening amount of sense. "I'm not used to thinking of the domains," Jee admitted. "We've been one nation so long... I believe the prince's plan has merit. But as a man of Shu Jing, what do you think?"

"We've not warred with ourselves in living memory," Saburo said soberly. "It'll be hard, sir. Hard and painful." He sighed. "But if a land has to burn... rake the duff from the nest trees, soak what you can, toss that spark - and pray." He set down the bird for the shore, and let the other hawk grasp his gauntlet. "Good thing we're sending her now. There'll be rain with the sea breeze 'fore sunset, if my nose is right... A few minutes, sir, and I'll have her a course whistled. You go do officer stuff."

Jee lifted a brow. "Is everyone in Shu Jing like you?"

"Why, no, sir. Some poor, deprived souls are even *polite*."

"This," Hakoda said dryly, weighing the bland scrap of Jee's message in his hand, "is just too polite."

Perched on a tent pole waiting for a response, the hawk preened.

"Our guests claim to know nothing," Bato informed him. "Though Teruko said it could have been an accident with Sadao and blasting jelly." He paused. "And Zuko... well, he's cold as ever. But if he thinks no one's watching? He looks..." Bato hunted for words. "I hate to say it, but he looks like you. When some of us are going to do something damn risky and there's not a Moon-blessed thing you can do about it."

Like me? Hakoda frowned at the thought, eyeing the hawk, and then the sandbent shelter all but concealed by the blue camp in between them. Why on earth would Bato think a firebender looked anything like-

Tracks in the sand.

"Hakoda?"

The chief held up a hand; *wait*. Frowned more deeply, stalking around his own tent down to the tide-line, where the shush of waves could wash the noise from his mind. He spared one glance for the healer's tent, where his children were tending their friend as the airbender drifted in and out. And bracing for Zuko's next visit.

Aang's in good hands. Let it go.

Water and shore and quiet. And if the water was too warm, and the smells of the sea different... well, he'd gotten used to that, these past two years. Though it didn't stop him from fiercely longing for home.

If the exiled prince felt even a fraction of that desperate need, Zuko was a dangerous young man indeed.

He is that. And much more. "I don't think Zuko is a noble," Hakoda said thoughtfully.

"Prince," Bato pointed out, used to his old friend's odd tangents. "Even exiled, you can't get much more noble."

"He's not an Earth Kingdom noble," Hakoda clarified. "You've met them. Some of them make good leaders, but... they're not leaders *because* they're good. They have their positions because they're noble. The bad ones just tend to die at the Fire Nation's hands more often."

"Born to rank," Bato snorted. "Glad we're not that crazy. Sokka should be chief after you - Tui and La grant that's not for a long time! - but your son knows he has to earn it."

"And what has Zuko been doing, all these years of exile?" Hakoda said pointedly. "He's been searching for their most deadly enemy. The Avatar, who they believe could do... *that*."

Bato winced. Kyoshi's tale had raced through the camp faster than a rogue wave. Every man in the fleet had had a brush with those demonic storms. And every man knew what it was to live near shore with a wall of water coming down. "That's a long time to carry a grudge. If it's true."

"It's a grudge worth carrying that long. If it's true." Hakoda met Bato's scowl with a frank look. "Why else are we here? To make sure the Fire Nation never kills our wives and our children again. I'd fight them a hundred years, if that's what it took. And so would you."

"I might," Bato admitted. "But Kyoshi's dead."

"Is she?" Hakoda said bluntly. "Zuko said he'd encountered Roku and Yangchen, while trying to heal Aang. Sokka tells me he's seen Aang *be* Roku. And Kyoshi, when he needed her to speak the truth of a death almost four centuries ago." He paused, not liking where his thoughts had led. "If that's true... then in a way, so long as *any* Avatar is alive, Kyoshi still exists."

"It doesn't change anything."

"Doesn't it?" Hakoda said quietly. "I hate to admit a firebender's right about anything, but Iroh has a point. Facing evil is one thing. Facing men driven by revenge... that's a much harder fight."

"We always knew it'd be hard," Bato acknowledged. "All right. What's really bothering you?"

Hakoda sighed, looking over the water. *Behaving* water, unlike the crashing breakers any time Zuko and his daughter crossed paths. "Two things. First... I think Kanna was right about waterbenders."

"What?" Bato frowned. "You've seen how much Katara hates them. And none of us have attacked those firebending bastards."

"But we all want to," Hakoda said grimly. "Sokka told us Zuko saved their lives. We should at least be willing to hear them out. But it's like fighting the tide just to hold steady. And it's worse any time she has him in sight."

Bato started to protest... and let it die, unspoken. "You've told her we need this truce."

"And no one's broken it. Yet," Hakoda said bluntly. "But I wish Kanna was here. I'd like to ask her a few questions about waterbenders. And about why she left this Master Pakku to come to our tribe instead." He gave Bato a look askance. "The same Master Pakku who taught Katara."

Bato drew back a step, eyes dark. "You really think what we feel about these firebenders... isn't us."

"If I remember Kanna's stories right, a waterbender can't make you feel something you don't feel already," Hakoda stated, hunting through memory. "But they can pull on it. Like the moon on the ocean."

"Then she'd better stop pulling," Bato said bluntly. "We're not the only ones who know Kanna's stories. It's one thing to hate the Fire Nation; we all know what they've done. But a man's heart should be his own." He dusted off his hands; *there's an end to it*. "So what else is bothering you?"

Hakoda sighed. "Zuko's up to something." He was a father; he knew teenagers. That young man was too straightforward. He had to be up to *something*.

"He's Fire Nation. Of course he is," Bato snorted. "Capturing the Avatar."

"No. That's too obvious."

Bato eyed him, then marched in to put a hand on his forehead. "You don't *seem* delirious..."

"I'm serious," Hakoda stated, letting his old friend have his way. "Zuko's spent months chasing the Avatar. But who's been with the Avatar, all this time? Who do we know has been using every crazy scheme he can think of to keep Aang safe?"

Lifting his hand away, Bato let out a low whistle. "He's been outfoxing Sokka?"

"He's definitely been trying," Hakoda agreed. "Of all the Fire Nation who've gone after Aang, he's the only one who's managed to stay on their trail. That young man may well be a ruthless, lethal firebender, but one thing he is *not*, is stupid." Hakoda frowned at the *Suzuran*. "And neither is Jee. He knows we're not going to believe his explanation. But he also knows that as long as he does explain, we have no excuse to break the truce. *Probably*. Which implies that whatever happened on that ship is important to the prince..."

Oh. Spirits.

It was so *simple*. Daringly, crazily simple.

Prince Zuko was born the heir to the throne. But so was Iroh, and Azulon obviously chose Ozai

instead... Spirits. He's not an Earth Kingdom noble. Birth isn't enough! He may not have a village to impress, only Ozai - but he still has to earn it.

I'm not facing an Earth Kingdom general. I'm up against a chief's son.

And while a noble might throw lives away like coins, a chief's son was responsible for his people. To the bitter end.

"He's not after Aang." At Bato's startled look, Hakoda elaborated, "I'm sure Zuko *wants* to take him. But no matter how much the prince may want his honor back... you heard Sokka. When does our unstoppable firebender *stop* chasing Aang?" He cast a glance toward *Suzuran*.

"When his men and his uncle are in danger." Bato turned a thoughtful look on the healer's tent, where a master waterbender waited.

"When those two go at it, Sokka says, it takes dawn or the moon to tip the scales," Hakoda stated. "Zuko gave his word to Toph to help Aang, and apparently he means to keep it. But if healing the boy will take *days*... His people are in deadly danger, every night." He let out a breath, thinking it through. "But if he keeps Katara focused on protecting Aang from him - from *him*, not the rest of them - he knows *he* has a chance to survive her."

Bato blinked. "You're saying he's using Katara's hate? To make sure she goes for *his* throat first?"

"We'd never expect it, would we?" Hakoda smirked.

"...Go soak your head," Bato sighed. "So if you're right - and I'm telling you, this wild idea is just plain *crazy* - what do we do?"

"Just what we've been doing," Hakoda said plainly. "We don't want him to know we've caught on. This has to be one of the riskiest moves he's ever made. He's got his head right in the leopard-shark's mouth; let's not jar anything."

"I think I'm going to go visit your daughter," Bato grumbled.

"Tui and La, don't tell her-"

"Spirits, no," Bato groaned. "I want an icepack."

"All right." Hands wreathed in water, Katara glared at the massive burn on a woozy airbender's back. "Just what are you doing, and why do you have me working down here?"

"Because his spinal cord didn't get torn up as bad as some of the nerves higher up," Zuko said honestly. *Agni, please let her listen.* "The damage that is there ought to be a lot more obvious."

"I've seen people hit by Ty Lee. I can tell when something's not *obvious*."

"And there wasn't anything we could do for people she hit, remember?" Sokka said, arms crossed. Behind him, Hakoda raised an eyebrow. Seated by them both, cheerfully aware Hakoda wanted him somewhere he couldn't cause trouble, Iroh only sighed.

Ichhi, ni, san, shi, go... "Lightning damage can be even more subtle than chi-blocking," Zuko said levelly. "I wish I had my charts. I wish we had a master healer here. But we don't." *I wish Toph were here.*

But Hakoda had asked the young earthbender to talk to Bato, so the fleet could get a better idea what kind of help they might be able to get from the Earth Kingdom army... oh, and by the way, what was this *little* discussion he kept hearing about?

Toph had been off like a shot.

You did that on purpose. Zuko tried not to glare at the Southern Tribe's chief. So he'd been stripped of an ally he'd been counting on. So Teruko was quietly fidgeting outside the tent, annoyed she couldn't keep him in sight, an armored tinderbox if any Water Tribesman decided to talk of women in the igloo. It didn't make a difference to his word.

Breathe. "This isn't fast healing. It has to be *started* fast; as soon as you can after someone's been struck." *Forget pride. Your people need results.* "If you hadn't been right on Aang right after Azula hit him, he'd be a lot worse off."

Maybe Katara's eyes weren't quite so narrowed. Or maybe it was just his imagination.

Act as if it's real. "But once you've got someone who's been struck stable, you have to slow down. All these little channels? They feed into each other. And when you clear one out, the whole flow can change. Fast." Zuko hesitated, searching for words to picture it. "It's like - if you caught a snowflake, and saw it - and then you're trying to bend it back together after it's half-melted."

That gave Katara pause. "A snowflake?"

"A lot of what we're working on is smaller than snowflakes," Zuko said levelly. *Are you terrified yet? I am. This isn't a job for an apprentice! We could hurt him, so badly...*

But they were all Aang had. He couldn't *not* do something.

"...What do you want me to do?"

"Be like an earthbender," Zuko said bluntly. Winced, and tried again. "Like - a mountain pool. Rest your hands right there, and be still. Quiet. Watching for the ripples. Watch Aang breathe. Breath moves your chi. Try to see the pattern of how his moves."

Katara frowned at Aang's back. "There's one knot, right there-"

"Don't!"

Her hand stilled, and she glared.

"That's what Yangchen had me draw off some of the blocked chi from," Zuko said soberly, still shaken. "You remember? The energy that *blew me through the tent?*"

"...Oh." Katara looked a little pale. "But it can't be right."

"It's not," Zuko agreed grimly. "But it's not hurting him, either. Not right now. I say we leave it until we've got the delicate stuff finished."

"Yangchen wanted you to *fix* it."

"And I tried," Zuko said flatly, avoiding the bait of her annoyance. "I got some of it out. But Avatar or not, I doubt Yangchen was a healer. And I know my teacher would say we need to fix his nerves *first*."

She frowned, but let it go.

Long minutes passed. Blue eyes closed, and Katara wrinkled her nose. "It's like trying to bend mist-

"Don't bend it!" Zuko yelped, alarmed. "Just - feel it."

Katara frowned, but kept still. "It is like mist. I'm not even sure it's there."

"Keep watching," Zuko said firmly, dipping fire from the pot of coals Hakoda had granted them. "I'm going to find some damage and fix it. Watch what happens." Hands at Aang's neck, Zuko shaped delicate circles, seeking places that whispered of hurt. Subtle, so subtle; torn brass, interwoven with healthy gold...

He wasn't sure how long he'd been working when Katara gasped. "It- that-

"Pulse?" Zuko asked, checking his work. "Shouldn't have been too big." *I hope.*

"Melt-water under a glacier," Katara said grimly. "You don't know what it's doing until it's almost too late."

"That's why we have to be careful." Zuko lifted his hands from skin. "Do you want to try, while I listen?"

"...Just move."

Zuko traded places with her, grateful the tent was large enough that one puff of exasperated steam wouldn't warm it. *Temper*, he told himself firmly, fighting down the sick roiling in his gut. *Just hold your temper. You're a firebender. Holding flame is part of what you are.*

Flames against skin, he closed his eyes and *felt*. "Up, just a little. Look under the surface flow... there. You've got it."

"Tickles," Aang giggled sleepily.

"You be quiet," Zuko murmured. "And stay still. This is tricky enough already." There, and there, and there... "Good," he nodded, and shifted back to plant fire-wreathed hands along Aang's neck. "Keep that up. I'm going to see if there's anything *not* fried in his brain."

"S plenty," the airbender yawned.

"Couldn't prove it by me." Zuko bit back anything more acid. He had *months* of idiocy to dissect. It wouldn't be nearly as satisfying if Aang wasn't awake to hear it.

Be calm. Like flowing lava. Like a ground fire, burning out what doesn't belong, readying the rest to grow and flourish in the rains...

Ever so slowly, dulled gold threads of chi began to brighten. Shocked muscle and tendons quivered; tiny ear-bones and the fragile surface of the eyes reclaiming *should-be* from wounded *was*. Seared, sparkling bits of chi, frayed and flying loose, were eased back into the ghostly lightnings of a healing mind.

Don't try to make it the way you think it should be. Just heal. The body's chi remembers the form it had before it was hurt. Your patient is healing. You're just there to fight for them, to help...

Odd. That reminded him of something-

Let it go.

The rhythm was like waves; like the beating pulse of a candle-flame. Sweep through to heal, then back to catch any frayed ends or knots uncovered by the flow of what was healed, then on again...

"Nephew."

Zuko blinked, weariness weighing him down like lead as Iroh's hand touched his shoulder.

"Enough," the older firebender said firmly.

Yeah. Stupid, Zuko berated himself. *Shouldn't push this hard. Not when your people could need you to fight*. A slow breath, and flames flickered out. Automatically he glanced around the tent; if Uncle had moved, who knew who else might have-

Someone had lit a lamp against the rain he could taste coming in the wind. The light danced over Toph's grin, where she'd pulled up a bit of handy rock to lean back by Hakoda... and Sokka, who was currently wrestling Momo for half a bunch of berries. Katara was rolling her eyes at her brother, a bit of sweat still beading on her brow as she crossed her arms and watched.

And on the furs, a gray-eyed airbender was staring at him, jaw dropped. "...You're really here."

What the heck is that supposed to mean? Too tired to try and follow Aang grasshopper-logic, Zuko shrugged, and strategically withdrew out of Katara's threat-to-Aang range.

...If anyone claimed he was hiding behind Uncle, he'd deny it.

"Where else would he be?" Katara stood, crossing to the furs to give Aang a smile. "Hey. You awake now? Really awake?"

"Am I awake? I don't know; I think I'm awake, but I thought I was dreaming before because, you know, you and Azula - but if I was *dreaming* maybe you *don't* know, and that had to be a dream, more like a nightmare - and if they're really *here* and this isn't a dream that's just *weird*."

"Please, make it stop," Zuko groaned under his breath. Caught a glimpse of Hakoda's stunned bewilderment, buried by an avalanche of words, and felt a hint of wry satisfaction.

"Kind of reminds me of Fong's energy drink," Sokka mumbled, yanking a few berries off with his teeth before Momo could snatch them. "Only he's not bouncing off the walls."

...I've chased them enough to understand Water Tribe mumble, Zuko thought, resigned. *That's just wrong*.

"But he always does wake up talking," Sokka went on, swallowing. "Planning to slow down anytime soon, buddy?"

"Slow down? They're right *here*, Sokka, and we don't even know how they got into Ba Sing Se, and-" Aang paused. "Um... this doesn't seem like Ba Sing Se..."

He was *not* going to bury his face in his hands, Zuko told himself firmly. The airbender had been *lightning-struck*. That Aang was making even this much sense was an improvement.

...Not that Aang had exactly been quick on the uptake *before* Azula had smacked him.

Be fair, Zuko told himself, remembering a night-dark fortress, an almost automatic teamwork that had surprised the hell out of him even as it'd saved his life. *Put him where he's defending someone, he can figure out tactics on the fly. It's people he doesn't understand. And long-term strategy. And... forget it, you're the healer, be responsible*. "We cleared a lot of the damage in his head. I

think if you tell him this time, it should stick."

"We're near Chameleon Bay," Katara said firmly. "Azula hit you with lightning, and we got you out. Appa's out eating dune grass; I know he'll be glad to see you. But Ba Sing Se..." Her shoulders slumped, but somehow, she managed a smile. "Aang, this is Dad."

"Oh." Aang smiled. "It's an honor to meet you, Chief Hakoda, sir."

"And you," Hakoda inclined his head. "General, if you and your nephew are finished here for today..."

"Actually, we are not," Iroh said thoughtfully. "Aang asked a question of me when last we met. Unfortunately, prudence dictated that we all flee before I could fully answer it. And yet perhaps that was just as well, for I have now had time to consider it fully," he glanced toward Katara, just for a moment, "and with more knowledge of... unalterable realities." His gaze rested on Aang. "As the Avatar, you need a firebender to train you."

"Um, no, really," Aang started.

"But it is now clear that your allies cannot afford to trust any of the Fire Nation," Iroh said levelly. "So I will tell you of the first firebenders. The dragons."

"Oh, I know about dragons," Aang smiled, relieved. Then frowned. "They're firebenders? I know they breathe fire...."

"How were you not eaten?" Zuko groaned.

Aang gave him a look of curious amusement. "You know that joke, too? Wow; I guess some things don't change in a hundred years."

"Joke?" Zuko said blankly.

"Well... sometimes I guess I'd annoy Shidan a little, and Kuzon always said...." Aang looked between the two of them, suddenly serious. "He wasn't joking?"

Shidan? Zuko kept his face still, heart racing. Coincidence. Had to be. Lady Kotone's husband had been a wandering swordsman; it was perfectly reasonable for him to keep using a sword-name like *Light off a sword*, if he and his clan still had disagreements.

"If he warned you Shidan might eat you if annoyed too often? No. He was not joking," Iroh said dryly. "Though the tales say that when it comes to humans, they prefer to only chew in self-defense." The general stroked his beard. "And that is the first thing you must know about dragons, that I think you will find the most difficult to accept, should you choose to approach one. Dragons are predators."

Aang rolled his eyes. "I *know* that, I've seen their teeth-"

"Do you?" Iroh said quietly. "Airbending is negative jin. Retreating and defending. Firebending is positive jin. Attacking. The sky bison who inspired your people feed on what does not bleed. Dragons sink their fangs into flesh and bone, and stop a beating heart. Earth may be your opposing element, but fire is your opposing *energy*. Dragons are foreign to everything you know of your people." He paused. "Dragons have eaten sky bison, in the past. It is one of many, many quarrels between our peoples. Be cautious."

Aang gulped.

"Easy, Twinkletoes," Toph said bluntly. "You're not a pushover when it comes to Appa. And you won't be alone."

"She is right," Iroh nodded. "You must not face a dragon alone. And you must not be afraid. Dragons are predators, and all predators search for fear. For what is afraid of you... is your rightful prey."

Aang flinched again; Zuko felt his nails bite into his palms, and deliberately relaxed his fingers. He was *not* going to pounce on the airbender and shake sense into him. No matter how tempting it was.

"But dragons also respect clans, and the assistance of their kin," Iroh went on. "Face a dragon with your friends, and you will be safe." He paused. "Now, to find a dragon... Many in the Fire Nation will tell you that is impossible."

"What? Why?" Aang blurted out. "There's lots of dragons!"

"A century ago, there were," Iroh said plainly. "Sozin, and his dragon companion Makoto... they did not just kill your people."

Aang paled. "That's *horrible*..."

"And you're still surprised Zhao tried to kill the moon?" Katara said sharply.

"I was," Iroh answered. "Dragons may be Agni's children, but they are *not* the Sun himself." He turned back to Aang. "So. To find what is lost or hiding, you must be determined, and clever. And you must have aid. Sokka will be a great help."

"What, me?" the Water Tribe teen blurted out.

"You are a tracker, like your father," Iroh smiled. "And you know Appa, so you have some knowledge of tracking flying beasts." He glanced at his nephew. "You are a much better tracker than I, Prince Zuko."

What, you want me to tell them? You're the one who's actually- Zuko swallowed, and tried to put his thoughts in order. "I've never tracked a dragon," he said honestly. "But it won't be easy. You won't find kills. Maybe a spot where the ground's bloody, but... They eat *everything*. Bones, hide, you name it." He paused, hunting memory. "But they don't like to eat it raw. Sometimes you can find places they've roasted it with their breath. Or if they think they won't get caught - they'll dig pits, burn wood or herbs, stuff a kill in the coals, and *bake* it." He looked at Sokka's dubious expression, and couldn't help but smirk. "So be very, very careful, if you smell roasted meat."

"The universe hates me," Sokka said faintly.

"Though it is said that can be one way to meet a dragon," Iroh mused. "And was, in better days. To build a barbecue, or stew outside, and leave an empty place visible from the air, was considered an invitation." He grinned. "Not only do they prefer cooked meat, they have quite the taste for garlic, and other spices. The hotter, the better."

"But if you don't know where to start, work with Toph," Zuko stated. "Dragons need to keep their claws sharp. And for that, they need rock. Flint, quartz; obsidian's fragile, but they like its edges. They'll go out of their way looking for it."

"Wait," Sokka frowned. "Teruko had obsidian. And she was using it to..." He stared at Zuko.

"Ah, you do see," Iroh smiled. "Yes. The great names - those whose families are proven firebenders and leaders of domains - are, indeed, treated as if they were dragons. It is considered... polite."

Polite, ha. It's the only practical way to trim nails, Zuko thought wryly. *Use scissors? What kind of scissors does the Water Tribe have?*

Then again, he'd never tried one of the bone edges they tended to use for knives. Maybe it was better than steel. For some things.

"So we look for obsidian," Toph nodded. "That won't be too hard."

Zuko eyed her, hearing Iroh's muffled chuckle.

"What?" she huffed, obviously feeling something that told her he was staring. "We look for a volcano. There's not too many of those."

"Toph," Zuko said carefully. And had to stop, just for a few breaths, given the Avatar - who said he'd *been* to the Fire Nation - wasn't saying one word to straighten her out. "Every island we have *is* a volcano. Or was. Or will be. And every volcano has firebenders on it, watching it. *Listening* to it. So lava doesn't move without people getting warned." He couldn't stop himself from glaring at Aang. "Unless an Avatar decides to destroy a *whole island*, and not warn *anyone*."

"That wasn't me!" Aang said defensively. "Shiyu said the Fire Sages were supposed to serve the Avatar. But they were going to help Zhao give us to Ozai-"

"And for that we deserved to get the whole temple turned into a volcano under us, and have the rest of it fall on our heads?" Zuko said in angry disbelief. "*Our* heads, Aang! Mine, Sokka's, Katara's, that Fire Sage who was trying to *help* you - and oh, by the way, *yours*!"

"Roku broke the chains!" Aang protested. "Everyone got out!"

"And that makes *everything* better," Zuko said, sarcasm biting deep. "Molten lava, rocks the size of tents falling from the ceiling, the entire *floor* splitting open every way you turned... but at least we weren't *chained* there." He bit back a snarl, red flickering in the corners of his vision.

Katara rose like a flowing wave, eyes blazing. "That wasn't Aang's-"

Sokka was between them both, eyes hard. "Don't. Don't say it. 'Cause just this once? I have to agree with Zuko. Everything we've been through, every fight we've faced? Including the North Pole? On the solstice, I was sure we were dead. *Dead*, Katara. If Appa hadn't found us at just the right time, we'd have been melted." He shot a glance at Zuko. "But she's right too. That wasn't Aang, and you know it. Aang's never tried to kill you."

Zuko stared at Sokka. Flatly.

"He hasn't!"

"Polar. Water," Zuko snarled, steam hissing from his breath.

Sokka stopped talking. Swallowed, visibly. "...Oh, man."

"Would someone like to tell me what you're both talking about?" Hakoda said levelly. "If this is about your navy *invading* the North Pole-"

"*It's not.*"

Zuko eyed Sokka. Who was eyeing him back, looking just as dubious. And who wouldn't be, having just echoed a deadly enemy?

Carefully, blatantly, Zuko took a step back and away, toward Uncle.

...That Sokka stepped back toward Hakoda in the same heartbeat, did *not* make him feel any better.

"The first time we got away from Zuko, Aang... well, the Avatar... swept everybody off the deck with this huge water-wall," Sokka said frankly. "Zuko grabbed the anchor chain - I still want to know how the heck you *did* that-"

"Training," Zuko said grimly.

"You trained for weird glowing-eyed waterspout... stuff? You're *weird*." Sokka shook his head. "Anyway. Zuko got back on deck. Everybody else... went into the water."

Hakoda sat up straight, face carefully blank of anything but sober interest.

"Yeah," Sokka said quietly. "I didn't really think about it. Until now." Reluctantly, he looked at Zuko. "How many men did you lose?"

"Lose?" Aang burst out. "It was just water! They were sailors! They could swim." At their sudden stares, the airbender flinched. "What? What's wrong?"

"Yep, that explains a lot," Toph said, half to herself.

"Explains what?" Aang demanded.

"How should I know? I don't swim."

"You don't?" Zuko said, blindsided. Toph seemed so utterly capable. How could she not know?

"No earth, Sparky. I hate it when I can't see."

"...Seawater has salt in it."

Toph's jaw dropped.

Zuko nodded to himself, sure she could take it from there. Toph could find earth in *metal*, for Agni's sake. She could definitely find salt. "Start with warm water," he warned her. "Don't stay in too long the first few times. Water that feels warm will still suck the heat out of you, fast." He didn't - quite - glance at Aang. "Water at the poles? Unless you've got good gear and special training... in minutes, you're too cold to move." He swallowed, remembering the bone-deep chill of the turtle-seal tunnels. "And then you drown."

Determined, Zuko looked Sokka in the eye. "We didn't lose anyone. But it was close. If we hadn't been able to launch the river steamer and go after people in the water, if we'd had to wait until we dug the whole ship out of the ice..." He shook his head.

"Yeah," Toph said into that painful quiet. "That does explain a lot." She waved a hand Aang's direction. "This is why you need to work on earthbending, Twinkletoes. You need to listen." She pointed at Zuko. "The day you two met, Sparky knew you tried to kill him." Her finger swung to Sokka and Katara. "And *they* knew you tried to kill him." Another swing, dead-on at terrified gray eyes. "Only one who *didn't* know it, was you."

"I didn't know!" Aang insisted. "I - how can just being *cold* do that to anybody? Snow's cold, and I can curl up in that just like Appa... and why is everybody looking at me like that, I didn't mean to!"

"No," Iroh said quietly, crouching beside the airbender's shaped-sand bed. "No, I believe you did not. For I have read of airbenders, and the chill of the upper air, which they endure without harm. You were trained to mastery from a very young age; many bending techniques, for you, come easily as breathing. And from what I have learned of Monk Gyatso, who raised you, he too had been a master for a very long time. It is likely he simply - forgot." Iroh smiled ruefully. "And without a teacher's advice that the other nations are different from your own, even fatally different... how could you have known?"

"But Katara buried Zuko in ice!" Aang protested. "And he was fine!"

"Fine?" Zuko sputtered. "You-"

Iroh held up a hand; *wait*. Eyed the airbender, until Aang started fidgeting.

Reached out, and poked Aang in the forehead.

"Ow!"

"Ah. I have your attention," Iroh said dryly. "Avatar Aang. I know you and my nephew have never truly talked. And so you, and your companions, must have learned of my nephew from... biased sources. But I distinctly recall that my nephew told you he had trained for *three years* to find and capture the Avatar. Fully expecting to find an adult, who had mastered *every* element." He paused. "So, yes. Prince Zuko is capable of surviving attacks that would *kill* other firebenders. As he has proved, facing you. Many times." He nodded, as if to himself. "Which is only fitting, for a great name. Dragons admire strategy, and intelligence. It is wise to show both in their presence."

Aang frowned, rubbing his head. "You almost make it sound like they're people."

"He's going to get eaten," Zuko sighed.

"You would be wise to treat them exactly as if they were people," Iroh said soberly. "Badger-moles and sky bison are wise animals, but they are animals. Dragons are far more. They can choose to do good, or evil."

"Shidan wasn't evil," Aang protested. "He was Kuzon's friend. And Fang was Roku's animal guide!"

"And Makoto was Sozin's lifelong companion, and helped lead the assault that destroyed your people," Iroh said levelly. "Evil dragons are not common. But they happen. And so our ancestors saw teeth and claws and flame turned against each other, and they have never forgotten. We honor that memory even today, with the Agni Kai; for like dragons, firebenders have tempers that burn within, and sometimes the only way to settle a dispute is with blood and fire."

"That's sick," Katara muttered.

Zuko snorted. "You push people off ice floes when no one's looking. We kill them in the arena, where everyone can see. Who's sick?"

"Everybody *knows* those you don't name have to die!"

"If someone gets killed in an Agni Kai? Believe me, everyone knows why they had it coming-" Zuko cut himself off at Aang's strangled gasp.

Aang was staring at Katara and her family, white-faced. "That's not true," he insisted. "It's *not*. You're a good person. You're a *great* person. You'd never kill anybody!"

Katara bit her lip. "Aang, you don't understand-"

"What am I supposed to *understand*? The Water Tribes *kill* people? Your *own* people? That's got to stop." Aang drew himself up, shaky but determined. "And it's going to stop right now-"

"*No, it's not!*"

On his feet, Zuko swallowed dryly, feeling the weight of eyes on him. *Damn it, I never think first....* "No," he got out. He'd started; he had to finish it. "You are *not* going to do to the Water Tribes what Kyoshi did to us. I *will not* let that happen." *Not while I'm still breathing.*

"But-"

"You're not Water Tribe, you're not Fire Nation - you've never tried to understand *either* of us, or you wouldn't even be thinking it!" Zuko snarled. "Agni! What does it take to get through your skull? What do airbenders *do* when one of their own goes evil? When he hurts people? When he tortures animals? When he *lies* to people, just to get them to turn on each other and tear themselves apart?"

"That doesn't happen!" Aang glared at him. "The elders know when people lie."

"I don't care if they know," Zuko said bluntly. "Yangchen would tell you, it *does* happen!"

"Who?"

For a moment, Zuko could only stare at him. "They didn't even tell you who the last Air Nomad Avatar was?"

"She was?" Aang's eyes widened. "You mean that Yangchen? Wow. There's a big statue of her in the Eastern Air Temple, but nobody ever said she was.... What'd Kyoshi ever do to you, anyway?"

"You don't know?" Zuko said in disbelief. "You've *been* Kyoshi, and you don't-" He gripped his fraying temper in both hands. *Airbender. He's trying to deflect you. Don't let him.* "What Kyoshi did isn't the point! But what she did to us is part of *why* my people are at war today. Why people like Zhao are in charge, and those like Jeong Jeong are *hunted criminals*. Do you want to do that to the Water Tribe? Do you want to make them like *us*?"

Wide-eyed, Aang looked away. "Sokka?"

The Water Tribe teenager looked back, blue eyes sober. "You're going to have to ask Dad on this one, Aang."

"I'm asking you," Aang said firmly.

"And it's too big for me," Sokka admitted. "Aang - this isn't a little thing, like getting the village to have fun. This is how we *live*. Even Dad wouldn't try to change this without getting the whole village together. All the warriors, all the elders; everybody."

"And if I did, I could tell you what they would say," Hakoda finally spoke. "I'm sure you have the best of intentions, Aang... but no." He eyed Zuko, as if the firebender were a particularly intricate finger-trap that had just twisted to present a new lock. "Whatever Avatar Kyoshi did or didn't do, the Fire Nation *believes* her actions led to the current war. If we want the fighting to stop, on both

sides... I don't think it would be wise to raise her ghost over any peace."

"Which kind of brings up something we've gotta figure out," Toph put in. "If we're going to end the war, we need something to say everybody's going to stop fighting." Blind eyes swung toward the firebenders. "So what do *you* mean by truce? 'Cause right now, Sokka and Katara think you *can't* hold one and make it stick, because Fire Nation women fight."

Outside the tent, Zuko heard a distinctly non-marine yelp.

"Oh, dear," Iroh murmured. "Yes; that is how warring Water tribes and villages are accustomed to dealing with hostilities." He frowned. "Historically, it was the great names who went to war, and arranged peace. Though a wise great name always took council with his people. These days... it is the Fire Lord, and the Council of Generals, with whom you must deal. Should a treaty be written, and signed, and published throughout our land - some few might fight on, but they would only do so as criminals."

"That's not the truce you've got going right now," Sokka argued.

"It is not," Iroh agreed. "The shelter of dragons' wings is older than any Fire Lord. It holds so long as an injured young firebender is in need of it to choose his loyalties... and more practically, it holds so long as those providing shelter are willing to risk their own lives for the child."

"Zuko's hurt?" Aang looked worried.

"He was," Iroh said levelly. "Azula struck at him, as she struck at you. My nephew knows a block, but he was unable to perform it fully. So, yes. He was... hurt." Iroh paused. "But that shelter is not being held for him."

Aang gulped. "I'm an airbender!"

"Born one, yes. But you are the Avatar, and you are also a firebender." Iroh smiled wryly. "It is a technicality, and Captain Jee is well aware of that. We are fortunate, that he thinks well enough of myself and my nephew to allow it." His voice dropped, as Iroh glanced at Hakoda. "Jee, too, is a widower, with children... though his are grown, and in service. I believe you can imagine how he worries. And no matter what his orders may say, or how firmly he may believe in the need for them - a true father wishes his children away from danger, and death."

Zuko hid a wince.

"You mean... Captain Jee's helping us?" Aang sank back into fur, eyes wide.

He's exhausted, Zuko judged. Damn it, it's still too soon. He needs rest.

"He was not ordered *not* to give shelter," Iroh said dryly. "He is a loyal officer, one of true heart. He will not disobey his commander. But there are things he can *avoid* doing. For a time."

"That's enough to get him executed, if Azula finds out," Zuko said harshly. "Sooner or later, she will." He glared at Katara. "I don't care what you think about me, but my people are risking their *lives* to make this work." *Doesn't that mean anything to you? How can you see loyalty like that and not care?*

But the other nations didn't feel loyalty. Spirits. He felt so alone.

"Easy, Sparky," Toph said firmly. "I think I get it." She nodded at the others. "Like Ba Sing Se. People can't break the rules, not without getting in big trouble. But Jee's trying to bend them." The

little earthbender shrugged. "So I guess we just need to figure one more thing out. What's an airbender truce?"

"We... kind of don't have those, I guess," Aang said, tired. "I mean, why would we? We never fight anybody!"

Deep inside, Zuko felt chill. "At the Southern Village, you gave me your parole."

"Well, yeah," Aang shrugged. "Everybody was scared, and I didn't think I could beat you without someone getting hurt, and... it got you out of there, right?"

Cold. He felt so cold. "You made me a promise you never meant to keep."

"I said I'd go with you," Aang grinned. "I never said how far... hey!"

Out. Get out before you hurt someone. Everyone.

Zuko pushed out into the downdraft before the storm, soul shredding in knives of ice.

Silly Zuzu. Why would the Avatar think you have honor? No one else does...

"Lieutenant, follow him!" Iroh's voice snapped.

He didn't care. There was only the shore and the sea and *getting away from people*.

He didn't want to hurt anyone. He didn't. But *he* hurt, and it was just too much...

Away. Now.

Footsteps, following him. He tried to ignore them, feeling that fire flare whenever blue threatened to come near. And it was hard to think, but even if none was better than one, one was definitely better than lots, and there was a *reason* he shouldn't just burn everything blue to ash, he knew there was...

Away.

Rain and waves and only one breathing behind him. Sand was wet under his sandals, sliding chill along his tabi where unwary steps had scooped grains over his feet. Wind laughed in his face, and he *loved* the wind, why did he want to burn it now?

Move. Get the poison out.

This wasn't fighting. This was *pain*, and no kata could be enough.

Closing his eyes, he could almost smell a feathery mane, a touch of *friend, feeling-pain, sharing-pain, share, show*.

A deep breath, and he lunged into the dance.

I shouldn't be alone...

But there was no flash of red scales to echo his movements. No rumbling breath to warm him, to remind him someone watched, and cared. There was only the dance. The way dragons cried.

Slowly, aching, the chill loosened its grip.

Heartsick, Zuko brought the dance to its circling close, staring up into raindrops. Spirits, he still wanted so much for something to *burn...*

It's sand. Nothing will get hurt.

Relaxing his stance, he reached up with fingers and chi, one swift stroke down to catch the mist of lightning carried by even the mildest drop of rain...

Rain blazed, falling water wreathed in opalescent fire.

"Oh..."

Startled, he swung around.

Teruko had her hands open and harmless, gaze equally on him and falling fire. "Easy, sir. Just making sure no one bothers you." She looked at the sparks flowing off her armor, his robes, dashing themselves out on the sand. "That's some sweet bending, sir. Most people don't have the knack for fire-rain. Agni knows I never did, or I'd be home tending forests instead of marines."

Zuko swallowed dryly. "You've seen this?" He caught a droplet above his palm, bright as diamond. "You know what this is?"

Teruko drew in a sharp breath. "You don't?"

Wordless, he shook his head. Questions; he had so many questions, and he couldn't get them past the lump of *no honor, not trusted, never...*

"Breathe, sir." Worry drew black brows down. "Who do you need dead?"

Zuko stared at her.

She watched him just as intently, and suddenly smirked. "Feeling better?"

Yes, was the word that wanted to spring to his lips; he bit it back. "Ah..."

"Your grandfather does the same thing when he's had it with idiots," Teruko shrugged. "It's storm out or kill the bastards, and your grandmother gets cranky if she has to get blood out of the carpets."

Zuko blinked, stunned.

"Lady Ursa is from Byakko, sir," Teruko stated, obviously mincing it into small words. "Everything I've heard of Princess Azula says she's got Azulon's own temper. But you? You obviously got Shidan's."

"I don't even know him," Zuko managed.

"I don't know why that happened, sir," Teruko said bluntly. "My family may be on the domain council, but that's the elders... I know your grandparents. It had to be important." She paused. "And I know enough about Byakko to guess why they wouldn't want the Fire Lord's security poking around."

Zuko drew in a measured breath. "Can you tell me?"

"Not most of it," she said frankly. "But send a message to them, when you can. We have trade partners in the Earth Kingdom." She grinned wryly. "Some of them on the west coast are a little..."

weird. War's pretty much ignored them, though, which is good. Too spooky for the Earth Army, too wet for how most of our army gets trained for... sir?"

Heart in his throat, Zuko dug out a packet of papers that had survived Azula's blast. Thank the spirits he hadn't kept them up his sleeves.

Brows arched, Teruko moved close enough to shelter pages from the rain. Read through details of a carefully faked identity, overtopped by the impatient red stamps of a government functionary. And grinned, nodding for him to hide them back away. "Yes, sir. That's them."

Foggy Swamp, Zuko thought, stunned. "They're *waterbenders*."

"Who live in a swamp," Teruko said seriously. "Byakko's not just a mountain clan. Not for a long time. That's the only reason our domain's got enough leeway to *be* odd. Smart lords know eventually someone's going to screw up land so it needs to be soaked before it burns, and we're the only ones who know how to set fires with rain."

"That's what it's for?" Zuko caught another scatter of drops, sparks blazing and dying around them with a whisper of will. "I've never seen... I don't *know* how I'm doing this..."

"You're Shidan's grandson," Teruko said simply. "He's good, sir. The best." She smiled a little. "And he'll know you're his the minute he sees you. You have his eyes."

Zuko flushed, stung. "Sozin's eyes-"

"*Dragon's* eyes. Sir." Teruko gave him a stern look. "They don't teach that in schools anymore, but it's the truth. You've got a lot of dragon in your family. On both sides."

Face still burning, Zuko looked away. "I get enough stories from Uncle, Lieutenant."

"Sir-"

"Don't. Just - don't." He breathed deep, forcing down pain for what needed to be done. "I'm not *special*, Lieutenant. You want that, follow Azula. She's the *prodigy*. I'm just... someone who tries. And fails. A lot. I have a plan. I think it'll work. And no one's killed me yet." He shrugged, weary and heartsick. "That's all I am. You want a legend... the Avatar's back there."

"I didn't join the navy to serve legends, sir," Teruko said angrily. "I'm here to serve our people. Even if one of my commanders is acting like an *idiot*."

The idiots are all back in that tent- Zuko thought of that, and what he'd just said, and paled.

"Lieutenant. I am... so sorry." He bowed his head. "I never doubted your honor."

She studied him a bit longer, frowning. Sighed, and shook her head. "Let's get out of the rain, sir. You've got to see what Toph put together for us. That girl is *solid*..."

Letting words wash over him like rain, Zuko followed.

Chapter End Notes

Flour, as a finely divided powder, is a lot more combustible than most people think.

No, you're not imagining the "Dragonheart" quote. I couldn't resist.

As far as timelines go, I go by "spoken canon overrides written". So yes, I use Koh's dates.

Yes, Jee has his very own Ragtag Bunch of Misfits. (See also Reassigned to Antarctica, Reassignment Backfire.) Anyone fond of TVTropes should know Ozai is *doomed*.

Azula, however, is Dangerously Genre Savvy.

Everything we've seen Aang and other airbenders do - high-altitude flying, curling up in snow caves, being completely untouched when Zuko hauls him through a blizzard - indicates to me that airbenders have their own climate control. They're definitely very cold-resistant.

Why Roku would not have known about loyalty... as Iroh mentioned many, many chapters back, the Avatar belongs to the whole world, not one nation. Avatars are not bound by loyalty. They are the only firebenders who aren't.

Unfortunately, this missing bond is information the White Lotus Society has, but most people do not know. And the Fire Nation doesn't talk about this so much as feel it. See Meixiang's discussion with Suyin; she's being as blunt as she is there because her daughter was not raised in the Fire Nation - and, so far as Meixiang knew up to that point, was Earth Kingdom. Therefore, whatever Roku heard growing up, he would have attached to what he felt, in regard to friendship and all that went with it. And given the court used to be a lot more friendly place, traitors' deaths would have been rare, and definitely not talked about.

I've also been reminded that many people are not familiar with how large predators operate in regard to territory. Simply put - they hold as much as they can reasonably defend, and no more. This holds true for lion prides, wolf packs, what have you. There isn't one lion pride in charge of all of Africa; there isn't one wolf pack that "owns" all of Yellowstone Park. (And wolves do go to war as packs, by the way.) So no, in a normal situation, a Fire Nation great name would not try for more territory than a reasonable-sized domain. They may make alliances that involve multiple domains, but they wouldn't take them over. Any great name who did, normally, would be faced by a bunch of smaller domains who did not want to be taken over by someone they weren't personally attached to, thank you. And that alliance would in turn fall apart just as soon as it wasn't needed anymore.

"Dragon Chases the Moon" is a Tai Chi move.

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Warning, Azula shows up later. This is never good. It may, in fact, be Nightmare Fuel. Your Mileage May Vary.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There shouldn't be lightning with this storm, Hakoda thought, calculating exactly how fast he could get to and douse the coals. *But you couldn't prove it in here.*

His children were quiet, feeling tension sing in the air. Toph was on her feet, still but ready.

Iroh was just as still, gaze fixed on a startled airbender. The stillness of a leopard-shark, the moment before the strike.

Firebenders make their own fire. Dousing the coals won't even slow him down-

"I wonder," Iroh said, very quietly, "precisely how well you did know Kuzon."

"Why would you say that?" Aang gulped. "He was my friend."

"I wonder," Iroh stated, just as quiet, "because to say what you said to my nephew, to imply that *from the moment you met*, you intended to treat him as if he had *no honor* - that, is either ignorance, or malice." Gold eyes burned, steady as flame. "Which is it?"

"He was attacking us-" Katara started.

Iroh's glare cut like shattered flint.

But in that breath the airbender rallied, and faced Iroh with a set jaw. "He attacked the village. I'm not going to say I'm sorry I lied to him. I'm *not*. Kuzon would tell you Zuko was the bad guy."

"Would he?" Iroh wondered. "And what would he say about Pohuai Stronghold?"

"Um... where?"

"See?" Katara settled her shoulders, satisfied. "Zuko would never rescue *anybody*."

Hakoda's eyes narrowed. Was it his imagination, or had Aang actually flinched?

"Oh, Twinkletoes," Toph said, dead level. "You better come clean on this one. Frozen frogs and all."

"It's not like he did it to help!"

Katara's smile slipped.

"Frozen frogs?" Hakoda raised a brow at Sokka.

"We got sick after that typhoon," his son shrugged. "I was talking to people who weren't there;

Katara was kind of out of it, too. Aang went to get help, came back with frozen frogs for us to suck on. Gross, but effective." Sokka eyed Aang. "So what else happened?"

Aang winced. "I got caught, okay?"

"You got caught?" Katara said uneasily. "By the Fire Nation?"

"Well - Zhao came after me with these *crazy* archers in facepaint! They shot through wind at me, they shot through *ice* - I jumped off a cliff and they just kept coming, shooting arrows with ropes, and they had *nets*, and... they caught me." Aang gulped. "And Zhao had me chained up, and I knew you guys were in trouble, and I was trying to get loose, but I couldn't - I didn't know it was him!"

"You didn't know it was Zuko?" Sokka said, amazed.

"He was wearing a mask, and using swords, and he didn't firebend at *all* - even when there were guards all over us! And we got out the gates because Zhao said he needed me alive, and he had *swords* at my *neck* and - I didn't know! Not 'til the archers knocked him out. And I took the mask off, and... even if it was Zuko, I couldn't leave him there. I didn't!"

"Fortunate for you both," Iroh said dryly. "I would not have appreciated rescuing my nephew from Zhao's clutches." He grimaced. "I doubt there would have been anything *to* rescue."

"He rescued you," Katara said numbly. "*Zuko* rescued you?"

"No wonder Zhao tried to kill him," Sokka realized. "Zuko got you right out from under his nose? That must have *stung*."

"It was not the first time Zhao lost to him," Iroh smirked.

"It doesn't change anything," Aang said, determined. "You know he didn't do it to help. He did it because if Zhao got me first, he couldn't go home. Where's the *honor* in that?"

Iroh sighed. "You see the Fire Nation as those who murdered your people. And many did. But I know of one who saw the storm-clouds gathering, and did his best to warn you all."

"Kuzon," Aang breathed.

Iroh inclined his head. "He came to Gyatso. It must have been soon before the comet came... Gyatso told him not to stay and fight, but to flee." His gaze rested on Aang. "You had vanished, and what Gyatso wished most of all was that one ally would survive to search for you, and give you aid. And Kuzon did search for you. For the rest of his life. Until... I was on campaign in the Earth Kingdom; I do not know what finally was one transgression too many for Fire Lord Azulon. But the outcome was... fatal."

Aang twisted away, gray eyes leaking tears. Katara hurried to his side, turning an angry look on the firebender.

Iroh gazed back, unimpressed. "Kuzon has a daughter."

Slowly, Aang looked up.

"Lady Kotone is in her eighties, but for a firebender of her strength, that is not old," Iroh went on. "She rules Byakko with her husband, to this day. I would have advised you to go there, for she remembers her father's quest, and would have honored it."

"Would have?" Sokka said, uneasy.

"Lady Kotone also has children," Iroh said plainly. "And one of the younger daughters - I suspect, partly to buy Byakko protection from Azulon - was given in an arranged marriage. As is common, among firebenders. We are jealous as dragons of our powers, and Sozin's line is most jealous of all."

He can't mean- Adding up what Iroh hadn't said, Hakoda winced. And bit back curses that would have turned the air blue.

Sokka was only a few breaths behind him. "Oh, man..."

"What?" Aang asked, eyes heavy with weary nerves. "What'd you do to Kotone's daughter?"

"Nothing," Iroh said bluntly. "Save stand as her friend, and her brother, when she would allow me."

"Her brother?" Aang said, bewildered. "What'd you do, adopt her? Kuzon said families do that for heirs, but your family's got heirs, you've got-" He cut himself off, paling.

Iroh nodded once. "If you were to seek aid in Byakko now, Lady Kotone would ask you how you have treated her grandson. I do not think she would like your answer." Heading for the door-flap, he paused. "For one who badly needs any ally he can find, you seem most determined to throw them away."

Rain swept in through the gap, and he stalked out of sight.

"He's Kuzon's-?" Aang leaned on Katara, shaking his head. "He can't be. Zuko's not - he just *can't* be."

"Ally?" Sokka was sputtering. "Where does he get off- Wait a minute..."

"An *honorable* opponent," Hakoda said grimly, looking at Toph. "And Azula wants them *both* dead."

"Yeah," she winced. "I think that's what Uncle was trying to get at."

"Then why not just say it?" Hakoda said, exasperated beyond all measure. *Fire Nation!*

"Because she's Zuko's sister." Toph's face scrunched up for a second, before she swallowed angry tears. "You didn't hear what I heard, before Zuko blocked that lightning. He promised their mom he'd *protect* her. Even if she tried to kill him... Zuko *promised*."

"Would one of you stop talking and make sense?" Katara demanded.

"Fire Nation customs," Sokka said practically. "If two people are trying to kill each other, and somebody worse comes along, it's okay to work together. Even if you're going to go back to killing each other later."

"Except you can only do that if both sides have *honor*," Toph said bluntly. "Sock him in the gut next time, Aang. It'll hurt less." Her fists clenched. "And you knew it! Uncle's right. You hurt Zuko, you blow me off when we're trying to train, you hung around doing nothing in Ba Sing Se while Katara was twisting her head up in knots, you don't listen to Sokka unless you don't have any ideas - you *are* trying to kick us out. Why? It's our fight, too!"

"Well, it shouldn't be!" Aang snapped back. "I'm the one who started this. I ran away, remember?"

Like *you* ran away. Only I let a war get started, and Kuzon's dead, and everybody's dead, and it's *all my fault!*"

"Aang," Katara whispered, heartsick, "it's not, it's really not..."

"Make room," Hakoda said quietly. Moved in, and scooped up the thin little boy. So light, to carry so much hurt.

Aang stiffened. But didn't break free, as Katara and Sokka crowded in, and even Toph let out a relieved breath and skipped over into the hug.

"It's all right to cry," Hakoda said gently. "Even men cry, when it's too much." *The fate of the world, a century of war... that's too much for anyone.* "Aang. I don't know much of spirits, and I know even less of the Avatar. But I know you. You, Aang, the airbender who's saved my children's lives. That's the young man I mean to help." He smiled into disbelieving gray eyes. "Do you have any idea how many people the Fire Lord's ticked off? It wouldn't be *fair* to leave them out of the fight."

"That's what I'm saying!" Sokka grinned. "Airbending's all about deflecting attacks, right? Like a shield. So, let us airbend *for* you. So you and Toph and my sister can kick his butt."

"But - I have to - Roku said," Aang stammered.

"Roku never said you had to do it alone," Katara said, determined. "We found you, Aang. If the spirits just wanted you to do it by yourself, why didn't you wake up decades ago?" She touched his face. "They knew you'd need help. They knew you'd need us."

"But you could get hurt," Aang gulped. "You could..."

"We know that, dummy." Toph's words were rough, but her grin was honest as good ice. "Airbending's about freedom, right? So you've got to let *us* be free. We're *coming*, Twinkletoes. This isn't a rumble match, or any kind of honor duel. This is us against the Fire Nation. And we're gonna *win* it."

Tears were trickling. "The Avatar's supposed to protect the world," Aang whispered.

"Given what I've heard of the Hei Bai spirit, and the Northern Air Temple, and a certain earthbender rebellion," Hakoda winked at his daughter, "no one said the world couldn't *help*."

That brought the tears, flooding free at last.

Shoulder damp, Hakoda stepped out of the tent, drinking in the clean wind of a storm passed. The youngsters could look after themselves for a while, Aang sleeping the sleep of a man who'd finally shared his burdens with family. And Katara promised she'd try her new healing technique, very carefully, as soon as the moon was high, so... *Oh. Not good.* "Trouble?"

"Not... exactly." Pale, Bato swallowed. "They didn't *make* trouble. Zuko tore out of camp like an arctic rooster with his tail on fire-"

"Zuko?" Hakoda interrupted, startled. What did the Fire Nation prince have to do with anything when his family was finally...

Anger stirred, like the first waves warning of storm. Shoulders stiff, Hakoda jerked his head down the shoreline. "Come on."

"What are we doing?" Bato asked.

"Getting away from my daughter."

With a drawn-out whistle, Bato followed.

Past the ships. Past the last tents, and fellow warriors on watch. Hakoda nodded, and exchanged a few words, but kept going. Testing himself, angry, reminding himself of his duty as a chief, which included keeping track of a-

Reluctant ally.

Hakoda crossed a few more yards of sand, and sighed. "I think this is far enough."

"Far enough for what?" Bato said, exasperated.

"To think," Hakoda said grimly. "I forgot about Zuko."

"You what?" Bato choked.

"Aang was upset," Hakoda said dryly. "And so was Katara. And nothing else mattered but putting their world back together." He shook his head. "Firebenders and earthbenders need to be close to what they're bending. It seems waterbenders are the same."

"She... spirits." Bato winced, looking away. "You can't let her do this, Hakoda."

"No, I can't," Hakoda agreed bleakly. "The Avatar may be the world's hope, but he is not the whole tribe. If I can't think clearly enough to remember the *firebender* Aang just insulted, someone's going to get killed." He eyed Bato. "You let it wait this long. I assume the prince didn't take insult as an excuse to breach the truce?"

Bato shook his head. "He tore out, and Teruko went after him. But all he did was get away from the camp-" Bato stopped. Looked around where they were, and peered into the distance, fingers sculpting locations and distances. "You know, I think he went about this far."

Hakoda took that in, and nodded slowly. "I owe that young man an apology."

"Apologize?" Bato said, aghast. "To him?"

"I didn't say I wanted to," Hakoda said ruefully. "But if this is what he's been up against to face my children, and he still hasn't tried to kill them? He has a better hold on his temper than Sokka thinks."

Bato was shaking his head. "That's Sokka and Katara!"

"And I love them," Hakoda said levelly. "But Katara stood behind Aang, and made us stand behind him, when he cut Zuko so deeply with words *Iroh* lost his temper. After Zuko stood between us and a fate even worse than the Fire Lord."

"What?"

Hakoda looked into the deepening night, gathering his thoughts. Trying to remember what had *happened*, not what he had felt. "He's very gentle, healing," the chief said thoughtfully. "I wish we'd had him talk to Asiavik before Katara did."

"Gentle?" Bato sputtered.

"Like a zebra-seal with her pup," Hakoda shrugged. "All teeth and snarl, but he was trying not to draw blood. Even when she goaded him..."

He tried to draw the healing for his friend, clear as a story-knife's symbols in the sand. The singing tension in the air, like a raven-wolf making itself small to approach an orphaned fledgling. The way Zuko's words had dipped into water, giving shape to the delicate battle they were waging for Aang's body and mind. The green-and-gold strength of high summer that had wreathed the prince's hands; the slow-breathed stillness as those hands moved, steady and patient as melting ice...

Hakoda paused, frowning. "It's not like Katara's healing. I don't know if it's his training, or the fire... She can heal and talk, and I would guess she can fight. Zuko... all that seems to reach him is the fire and the wounds." He drew memory closer, seeing the sweat on Katara's face, knowing his daughter would never give ground in the face of an opponent. Yet she'd stopped, trying to hide her trembling. While Zuko had moved smoothly on, drawing out veil after veil of the stars' own colors to work patience and flame into flesh. Until Iroh had seen something - a flicker of flame? A bead of sweat? - and *moved*.

Hakoda blinked, Iroh's words sliding into place like the block of snow outlining an igloo's base. "That's why Azulon didn't want him as heir!"

"Hakoda," Bato sighed. "Back up-"

"-And start from the beginning," Hakoda echoed the old refrain. "We've been thinking of the Fire Lord's son. We know what Ozai's done to the Earth Kingdom. But Zuko says he's *not part of the war*."

"Exiled with his uncle these three years," Bato recalled, thinking it through. "And it's said Iroh stopped fighting after Ba Sing Se..." He stopped cold. "Tui and La. You think it's true."

"He stopped Azula in the desert, he told the Avatar how to find dragons to teach him - spirits, he tried to protect the *Moon*," Hakoda breathed. "Even if stopping Zhao destroyed the entire invasion fleet!" He glanced at that silver glow, shaken. "What if he is telling the truth, Bato? What if he does want to stop the war, just as much as we do?"

"So what if he does?" Bato shrugged. Not objecting, Hakoda knew; just poking at the crazier parts of his friend's crazy ideas, to bring them down to earth. "He's in this for his nephew. Any man can see that."

"His nephew, who loves him like a son," Hakoda said quietly. "Who sees us - not Katara, but the rest of us - as honorable opponents." He let out a slow, angry breath. "Which is more than the Avatar's willing to do."

Bato looked at him soberly, gauging his seriousness. "What happened?"

Hakoda smiled without humor. "Did you know Aang believes none of his people were ever evil?"

"...How did that come up?" Bato asked faintly.

"You know how we deal with those not named. Apparently, firebenders do something similar," Hakoda said plainly. "Only they call it an Agni Kai, and they do it where everyone can see."

Bato shuddered in distaste. "Well, it's obviously not working."

"And would our way work, if one bad chief had the right to watch everyone dealt with?" Hakoda pointed out.

Bato paused. For a long time. "Oh, Ocean have mercy."

"That's what Zuko says Kyoshi did to his people," Hakoda said grimly. "That's what he stopped Aang from doing to us. And the Avatar wants to. Because Aang believes we're good people, and good people *don't kill each other*."

"We're good people because we deal with evil!" Bato sputtered.

"You know that. I know that. *Zuko* knows that. Aang?" Hakoda shook his head. "Zuko *shielded* us, Bato. He stepped between our tribe and the spirit of the world, and he didn't even think about it." He glanced back toward the camp. "He and his may have killed Ilaq and the others. But whatever he's done, whatever crime he committed to get himself exiled... that young man just saved more than our lives. He saved our *people*." Hakoda winced. "And I let him walk away bleeding."

Bato grimaced. "How bad is it?"

"Aang implied Zuko had no honor," Hakoda said levelly.

Bato swore, low and heartfelt.

"It gets worse," Hakoda said dryly. "When Zuko attacked our village? Aang promised to go with him, if Zuko promised not to hurt anyone. He *lied*, Bato. He always intended to escape. Sokka and Katara showing up wasn't a reason. It was just *convenient*."

Bato swallowed hard. "And Zuko didn't turn around and slaughter the whole village?"

"Lucky for us chasing the Avatar was more important than Fire Nation military policy, isn't it?" They'd both seen more than enough of that. The Fire Nation had a strict policy on rebellion: do it, and die.

"So the most powerful bender in the world lies when it suits him." Bato shuddered. "I thought it was just because he was afraid to lose Sokka and Katara. The boy didn't have anyone else; I didn't like it, but I could understand why. But it wasn't just once, was it?"

"Apparently Air Nomad elders *knew* when people lied," Hakoda stated. "But we don't. I wonder how old Aang was, when he learned other nations couldn't tell?" *I wonder how many lies he's told. He's twelve, he's alone, he's afraid - but Sokka's right. Someone needs to tell Aang he can't get away with this.*

Sokka was right... and hate it though he might, it looked as if Zuko was, as well. For all his power, the Avatar had less of a grasp on hard reality than Sokka had had at *eight*.

Or, as the prince would put it, Hakoda thought wryly, *the Avatar is an idiot*.

But Katara - spirits, his daughter was old enough to know better. She *did* know better. She was a trained waterbender, wasn't she? "I need to talk to my daughter. At *noon*."

Bato frowned; then, reluctantly, nodded. "Waterbenders are stronger at night... she's not going to like that."

"She'd like what I really want to do even less," Hakoda said wryly. "Water's the enemy of fire. When Zuko's angry with her - I can think."

Bato gave him a look askance. "Noon's good."

Well. That's the children settled, Hakoda thought. *Time to see what an adult can mend.* "So Zuko got clear long enough to cool down? Wise. How did the rest of his people take it?"

"They're not happy," Bato stated. "Hakoda... he didn't just stay out there cooling down."

Hakoda raised a brow, curious.

Bato shrugged a little. "He... it didn't look like bending. More like a story-dance." He swallowed, shivering a bit. "One of the heartbreakers."

Unsettling. But not nearly enough to spark this reaction. "And then?"

"Then... the rain caught fire."

Heart in his throat, Hakoda spun to look at the camp-

"Not here," Bato said hastily. "Just... around him. About ten yards or so. It all hit water or sand. Nothing burned."

Good. In a way. "The *rain* was burning?" Hakoda choked out. Everyone knew rain *damped* firebenders, how in the *world*-?

"Looked like," Bato said seriously. "Mind you, none of us got close enough to be sure."

"Teruko-"

"Just stood in it," Bato shrugged again. "Guess that armor's good for something... weird thing was? She looked surprised. But happy about it." He shuddered. "Spirits, if they can turn the *rain* on us..."

"I don't think most of them can," Hakoda said thoughtfully. Fitting together pieces of honor, and surprising mercy, and a will that would stand against the spirit of the world himself...

To protect us, his enemies, from something that would destroy us. Because that is what an honorable firebender does, for an honorable opponent.

Hakoda let out a slow breath. "I don't want him harmed."

"*Rain on fire*?" Bato said pointedly.

"I didn't say it would be easy," Hakoda said frankly. "But if we're not trying to kill him - I don't think he'll try to kill us." He looked over the ships, judging how well resupply was proceeding by their depth in the water. "I think Aang may be well enough to move soon. If so, we should consider leaving. I don't think I want to linger here if the Fire Nation is controlling the Eastern Lake."

"Good point," Bato nodded. "Spirits. If Azula's there, I'm glad I'm not in Ba Sing Se."

This is bad.

Pulling a thankfully quiet Jinhai along by the hand through the unsettled Outer Ring, Shirong judged the thinning scatter of restless refugees around them, the growing darkness of curfew, and the dark armor riding komodo-rhinos down the street. And grimaced. *We're not going to find a better place.* "Stay behind me."

Wide-eyed, Jinhai nodded.

Another breath, and they slipped into an alley. Casual. Almost subtle. But more than enough for the hard-eyed men still on the streets to know they were up to something.

Can't be helped.

Nor could the knife in the grip of yet another smirking alley weevil-rat, quick to grab an opportunity even in the midst of invasion. "Give me your-"

From the breath, the scrolls said. Shirong breathed and punched, knowing it wasn't smooth, wasn't quite right-

The stuttering bloom of fire was enough. Shrieking, the man bolted out past them.

"Um," Jinhai gulped. "Aren't those soldiers going to-?"

"Yes," Shirong grinned wryly. "But they'll be looking for a firebender." Planting his feet in stance, he flipped the street over. And them with it.

Ow....

Wincing, Shirong swayed on his feet in the tunnel. Breathed deep, and braced himself, waiting for the dizziness to pass. Amaya had said a few more days would see him right, but a little light bending should do no harm. And they all needed information, and he and Jinhai both needed sun, and given the Dai Li would be looking for him *alone*, and not with a young child....

"Amaya's gonna yell at you," Jinhai said firmly.

Shirong blinked at the glowing green light from the crystal Jinhai had taken out of his pouch. Practical kid. "Probably." He winced again. "We don't have to tell your father quite how close that was, do we?"

Jinhai looked dubious. Glanced back into the tunnel. Behind him, Shirong suddenly realized.

"Exactly how close was it?" an irritated Tingzhe Wen said dryly.

Bending his head, Shirong had to laugh.

And whirled, chains striking out like lightning.

"Dad!"

"That's not your father," Shirong said sharply, keeping himself between the boy and the chained spirit. "He's waiting for us in the Middle Ring, remember? There is *no way* he could be here." *And if he is, I'll apologize. Later.* "Shed that form! Now!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," it said silkily, false glasses gleaming. "Come, now; let's be civilized and take these off...."

"You're not Dad." Pale, Jinhai hid behind Shirong.

"No," the Dai Li agreed grimly. "It's a trick some spirits use. Find someone you want, or someone you fear, and take their form...." Shirong narrowed his eyes, catching the flicker of a smirk over the borrowed face, the faint bulge of a scroll tucked up one wide sleeve. "And for this one it was easy, because it was already pretending to be a scholar." *Shape-shifter. Couldn't resist playing with*

us. After knowledge- "Fox!"

It shivered, and glared at him.

"Fox," Shirong declared, certain of his ground. "Servant of Wan Shi Tong. You've got a lot of nerve. The Walls may be down, but the Earth King still holds the hearts of his people. You have no right to take knowledge not freely offered." He drew in a breath. "As Dai Li and loyal servant of the Earth King, I order you to release that form!"

Borrowed lips smirked.

"Um...." Jinhai shrugged at the obvious. "It's not working?"

"Release me now, and my lord may forgive your transgression," the fox chuckled.

"Release you?" Shirong said with deadly precision. Fire licked at the core of him, hungry to attack; spirits, he could feel the chains getting hot. "While you hold the form of this boy's father, draining his strength? I don't think so."

"What?" Jinhai almost dodged past him, keeping back only at a warning clank of chains. "What's it doing to Dad?"

"Amaya should be able to handle it," Shirong said firmly. "If a fox steals your form, you're usually bedridden with a fever. It makes things... easier for them." He eyed his captive. "If you won't recognize my authority-" *and spirits, why is that not working?* "-there's only one person who can render judgment." Reeling in the chains, he stooped, and pulled his furious captive across his shoulders.

"Ruffian! Unhand me at once!"

"Not yet," Shirong smirked. "We're going to see the king."

Oma and Shu, thank you for making me obsessed with the lost and the forgotten. He knew the hidden tunnels and back ways of Ba Sing Se; not in as much detail as Mushi's odd group of allies did, but in more breadth than any one of them. His shoulders ached like blazes, but they found their way back to the refuge caves before he had to put the chained fox down.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

We only got thirty feet past them, Shirong thought whimsically, rapping his restive captive on the nose with a few links of iron. *They're getting better.* Not that he could really blame General How's surviving men for missing them. They literally hadn't been trained to face Dai Li. And soldiers... well, soldiers on the Wall didn't have to think in terms of subterfuge. Wall, stones, and Fire Nation in obvious uniforms. No sneaking involved.

No wonder Princess Azula went through them like a hot knife through butter, Shirong thought. "I have an entity that requires the Earth King's judgment."

"An *entity*?" The taller of the two soldiers rolled his eyes. "You Dai Li really think you're something... we'll take charge of the prisoner-"

"It's not a prisoner! It's a fox!" Jinhai blazed. "And it's making Dad sick, and we've got to stop it!"

"A *fox*?" The soldier smirked, ignoring his older partner's hissed warnings. "Look, kid, I don't know what you're doing hanging around one of *his* kind, but foxes are just- mmph!"

Finally having gotten a hand over his partner's mouth, the older guard glared at them. "Mushu, use your head for something besides a place to hang your helmet. When a Dai Li tells you something's not a myth, *it's not*." He jerked his head toward the inner caverns. "Take it, get out of here, I *don't want to know*."

Smart man, Shirong thought wryly, managing an abbreviated bow.

"Why doesn't he want to know?" Jinhai wondered as they walked on past.

Nothing quite so shrill as a curious six-year-old, Shirong smirked, catching the guard's twitch out of the corner of his eye. "Most people think if they stay away from the spirits, the spirits will stay away from them."

"Oh." Jinhai frowned. "Does that work?"

"Only as long as the spirits want it to."

Sputtering erupted behind him.

Cheered, Shirong forged forward.

The tunnel opened up and outward, ceiling soaring up to give at least the illusion of not being trapped under tons of rock. Water flowed in shaped aqueducts along one wall, and a slight breeze told Shirong someone had made sure to open tunnels to let this ancient refuge breathe.

And there were people. A startling number of people.

Has it only been a few days?

He was still astounded by the breadth of Amaya's network, run right under the Dai Li's noses. Granted, her Fire Nation refugees seemed to be naturally closed-mouthed, and they'd all known the consequences if they were caught... but still. Decades, she'd been hiding them in the Outer Ring. And not only had not one talked, a fair number seemed to have hung onto the sharp wits and grim determination that had gotten them to Ba Sing Se in the first place. Like the Wens, they'd grabbed their families, made off with a surprising variety of supplies, and bolted.

And they hadn't come alone. As he and Jinhai made their way deeper in, they passed not only quiet refugee family gatherings, but worried neighbors' families, no few panicked university students and professors, and... well, at least three pairs of teens, various annoyed family members in tow, trying to explain to startled boyfriends and girlfriends exactly why their beloved's impulse was to rescue first and explain later. Without mentioning who - or *what* - they really were.

Not mentioning it where our loyal soldiers can hear, at least, Shirong thought ruefully. *That won't last. Scattered in the farmlands and the Outer Ring, they could blend in. Grouped together? Even Kuei's going to notice something eventually.*

Well. At least this little annoyance should be good for a distraction.

If I can find him before my back gives out... where is he... ah. One knot of guards. One harried young Agent Bon. And one Earth King, looking dubiously at a sword-smith explaining the realities of the invading army having seized the armories with liberal use of a hammer and a hunk of good iron.

"Forging takes *time*, your majesty," the smith growled, waving iron like an odd gray strand of light bamboo. "It takes time, it takes coal, it takes air - this isn't the Fire Nation. We forge by hand."

That's the *law*. We don't have foundries to pour steel. Why do you think the bastards up there have spears, not swords? You can't just pour a sword in a mold! But spearheads? Arrowheads? By the *tons*. So long as the walls held 'em, we could keep up, but now-" The man cut himself off, staring at wrapped chains.

"Your majesty." Shirong dumped the fox on the ground, chains and all. "I require a ruling."

Kuei blinked. "On Tingzhe Wen?"

"That's not Dad!" Jinhai yelled. "You stop hurting him, *now-!*"

Shirong snagged the boy in one arm before he could complete that sharp motion, feeling a wash of heat even through his robes. But no sparks, thank the spirits. "It's not Professor Wen, your majesty. It's a fox."

"A knowledge spirit?" Bon swallowed, and made sure he was between the Earth King and chains, obviously hunting in memory for the correct procedure. "Why haven't you forced it out of that form?"

"I tried. It didn't work." And he had the faintest of suspicions why, yet... it couldn't be. He was a loyal Dai Li. He *was*. "But my bending's still weak, which means I'm not exactly a force to be reckoned with against spirits." Shirong gazed at Kuei. "But you are."

"Me?" Kuei said faintly, eyes round behind his glasses.

"You've been trained for this, your majesty," Shirong said firmly. "You are the guardian of the spirits of Ba Sing Se, both of your people and the city itself. And this spirit-" he eyed the fox, not liking how it sneered back, "-has walked where it was not invited, and delivered harm upon one of your loyal subjects."

As he'd hoped, the formal phrases stiffened the king's shoulders, and Kuei gave him a short, regal nod. The Earth King frowned at the fox, eyes dark with displeasure. "Undo the harm you have wrought on Tingzhe Wen, and explain yourself!"

Poof.

Shirong dove and snatched the scroll, before the fox's jaws could close on it. Around them he could hear gasps and at least one shriek, as a sandy-red fox twisted in chains that had seemed to hold a man.

"Oh," Kuei said faintly. "Oh, my... what is that scroll?"

"A letter," Shirong said, surprised; unrolling enough to read the salutations. "An old one. To someone... visiting Ba Sing Se." *Oh my, indeed.*

"Someone?" Kuei said pointedly.

"A Fire Nation noble," Shirong admitted, lingering over that elegant, exquisite precision of address before he unrolled it to skim the contents. "Almost half a century ago, by these dates. Better times..."

-Your clan longs to see you home, Father. You should see Ursa pull herself up to try her first steps; she concentrates so fiercely! It's as well none of us bend this early, or she'd have set afire every tripping carpet. And you know how Shidan is when fledglings start walking on two legs; panicked as a lion-dog who's fostered a kitten-owlet! Yes, he's still like that, after all our children...

Shirong stopped. Ran his finger back to the top of the scroll, making absolutely certain of the names.

Kuzon. Kotone. Shidan. Ursa. Byakko.

"Jinhai," Shirong said, through what seemed a great roaring in his ears, "take this. Keep it safe."

Wide-eyed, the boy hugged the scroll close. "It's important?"

"Very important," Shirong said levelly. There was a good reason not to squash the fox into jelly with a pair of rock walls. He was sure there was. He just couldn't remember it. "It's Lee's."

The fox snarled.

"Apparently *someone* wants it," Kuei said plainly. "So I fear your master's claim must be denied." At his guards' start, the Earth King sighed. "Now what?"

"None of the rest of us can understand it, your majesty," Bon shrugged, trying for nonchalant. "We all know your dynasty stands between us and the spirits. We just don't usually *see* it."

"...Oh." Kuei swallowed hard. "Well. This could just be a mistake. He said his master has a right to unwanted knowledge-"

"He's lying," Shirong said bluntly. *If the scrolls we have are right; Oma and Shu, let them be!*

"Wan Shi Tong is a collector of knowledge. He'll take it any way he can get it. But he's a spirit, and this is human knowledge. He has no right to that unless someone gave it away."

The fox wrinkled its lips at him, and barked.

"It belongs to the Avatar's friend," Kuei said, troubled, "and the Avatar's friend stole from his master. He claims this is just recompense?" Kuei nudged his glasses. "That seems fair..."

The fox quivered in anticipation.

"Then that's a lie, too," Shirong said dryly. "Wan Shi Tong's a lot of things, but *fair* isn't one of them." He kept himself between Jinhai and any flash of white fangs. "Did Lee steal from Wan Shi Tong?"

A rumble.

"A Water Tribesman stole, and the Water Tribe must repay," Kuei said doubtfully.

"Did Lee, of the Northern Water Tribe, and some say the Foggy Swamp, steal from Wan Shi Tong?" Shirong said, voice edged with all the dire precision he'd honed on two decades' worth of spirits.

"Lee's not really Water Tribe," Kuei said grimly. "You know that."

"Yes, he is," Shirong replied. "It doesn't matter where he was born, your majesty. Amaya claims him as kin. He *is* of her tribe." The agent couldn't help but chuckle, some of anger's clutch loosening. "Which would probably drop their chief and half the waterbenders dead of apoplexy. So it's just as well they don't know. Yet." Oh, to be an ice-fly on *that* snowy wall.

But he could think again, and so he could realize the fox was studiously silent. "So it wasn't Lee," Shirong nodded to himself. Prince Zuko had as dire a respect for the spirits as any battle-scarred Dai Li. He wouldn't have crossed the Great Owl willingly. In fact, of all those Shirong had seen

near the Avatar, the only one who might be reckless enough to try something that suicidal... "It was Sokka, wasn't it?"

Silence. A soft growl.

"He claims," Kuei said skeptically, "the Avatar *owes* He Who Knows Ten Thousand Things."

"Then collect from the Avatar's hide," Shirong said darkly.

Somebody choked. "You want to say *that* to Wan Shi Tong?"

"I'm not saying it to him. I'm saying it to one of his servants," Shirong shrugged. "And the Earth King, who is honored throughout the Earth Kingdom, *including* the Si Wong desert, has every right to be so forthright to one who has dealt harm to any of his subjects. Which Professor Tingzhe Wen certainly is." He eyed the fox narrowly. "If the professor had been on the surface near occupying troops when you took his form, and not below ground, that fever could have put him at risk of his life."

The fox did not look one inch repentant.

Whatever Kuei heard stiffened his shoulders, and he stalked right up to the chained muzzle. "You *dare* hold one of my subjects accountable for an outsider's actions? Simply because he, too, tried to help the Avatar?"

For the first time, the fox looked uneasy.

"The world has been out of balance for a hundred years! It's the duty of every righteous citizen - no, every human! - to try to restore that balance. *And* every spirit!" Kuei's hands folded into unpracticed fists. "And you would pursue a petty revenge, against one of those trying to end this war?"

The fox whimpered.

"I believe your master has forgotten whose tomes contributed to his library," Kuei stated, eyes hard as flint. "We shall see that he *remembers* it."

Almost against his will, Shirong found himself drawing back a step. He could feel something in the air, in the ground; like a landslide, moments before it let go...

"We find you and your master, Wan Shi Tong, have behaved with contempt to us, and to our people! We find that you have done us harm; willfully, pettily, and with full knowledge of our desperation, beset by enemies! We find that you have cast aside the virtues of civilized creatures. And so, we render our judgment!"

The fox was shaking in its chains, eyes wide and wild. Shirong held his breath. It was said the Earth King's line descended from ancient shamans, but spirits...

"You, your master, and all his servants are hereby banished from our lands," Kuei decreed. "Your master may petition Oma and Shu. Should they decide his punishment is enough, we shall revisit our judgment. Until that day - *begone!*"

Chains fell through empty air, clattering on stone.

"Oh..." Kuei wobbled.

"Your majesty." Shirong abandoned his chains to steady the pale young man in royal robes. "That was... I'm impressed."

"I didn't know I could do that," Kuei said shakily. Blinked, and looked across the cavern. "W-what in the *world*..."

Incredulous, Shirong let Kuei lean on him. It wasn't just the guards, and Bon; all of whom he'd expected to see on their knees, given their king was pronouncing judgment. No; there were hundreds - spirits, over a thousand! - with bowed heads, grass before the gale of the Earth King's command.

Grass... and the great mountain pines, Shirong thought, seeing all Amaya's careful plans undone in one instant. For every Earth Kingdom soul was prostrated, but every *Fire Nation* refugee...

Honor to a lord not your own, Shirong read in those bended knees. *Oh. Damn.*

Jaw dropped, Kuei turned to stare at him.

Shirong cleared his throat. "We can explain."

Kuei raised a brow. Stepped away, toward the sword-smith on bended knee. "Who are you?"

The smith ducked his head. "I'm called Pei, your majesty."

"I didn't ask what you were called."

The smith opened his mouth... and, slowly, closed it. "Maeda," he said quietly. "I was born Maeda, of Hinokawa."

Kuei swung around toward Shirong, obviously shaken. "And you can *explain* this?"

"I never said you'd like it," Shirong said dryly. "Your majesty-"

"*Daddy!*"

Shirong had to smile, as Jinhai hit his father with the force of a small fireball. And yes, there was Amaya looking serious, and Meixiang swooping in to help catch her little boy...

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kuei finally *see* Meixiang. And blanch.

No. I can still fix this. "Your majesty," Shirong said impulsively, remembering his king's long hours in the palace library, "do you remember the story of the lion-dog and the cricket-mouse?"

Kuei blinked, and slowly nodded. "Why should I spare you, who are my prey?" he said softly. "How can such a little thing as you ever help me in my hour of need?"

"Ba Sing Se is caught in the great net of the Fire Nation," Shirong stated. "These people, all of them, are here because they fled that army. Trust them. They will help."

"You trust them," Kuei said thoughtfully.

"I have personal reasons," Shirong admitted, trying to calm his suddenly racing heart. "Lee saved my life. More than once." *Oh spirits, he knows.*

No. Kuei couldn't possibly know. Paranoia might be part of the Dai Li job description, but there was no way in the world the Earth King could know he was a firebender.

I hope.

Spirits, he was tired. And just... unsettled, in ways becoming ever more frighteningly familiar. Not that he had any idea what to do about them.

Amaya. I've got to talk to Amaya.

Duty first. His own heart later. "Your majesty," Shirong said formally, "if it suits your wishes to call for your current military advisors, I would like to make my report."

Tingzhe paced the length of the rough family room he and Jia had shaped, building a private family shelter among the host of other earthbent enclosures. Thank the spirits Amaya was staying with them, to "teach" Jinhai. No one questioned that the healer would need privacy for her patients, and who could blame the Wens for shaping their own shelter along with hers?

When it's actually we who need the privacy, Tingzhe thought wryly, looking over his family. Jinhai was napping on a cushion, a pot of water abandoned to cool on a stone table. Suyin - and, surprisingly, Jia - had their heads buried in one of the books smuggled down by the university, lost in a great battle against *waegu* in the Western Lake. Min... was an absence, but at least word was coming down that he was all right. And Meixiang... well, Meixiang looked exceedingly proper, wafting a hint of incense over the family tablets in their makeshift altar alcove. Frighteningly proper, considering what she'd proposed.

Propriety is the only shield we have left, Tingzhe thought soberly. *I've no idea what the Fire Nation folk here would do about a young firebender. Much less my own people! And considering Shirong...* "Are you certain he'll come?"

Arranging three cups before the small altar, Meixiang nodded. "He'll come for Amaya, at least. You saw how he looked." She regarded him steadily. "Love. Do you want to do this?"

"You made a good argument that it's necessary," Tingzhe said plainly. "He's a good man, and he needs help."

"But it doesn't have to be our help," Meixiang said soberly. "Sooner or later others will find out he's a firebender. Another family could do this more... conventionally. You wouldn't have to..."

"I have no intention of doing this because *I have* to," Tingzhe stated. "I am doing this because he is a good man, against all odds. And I would be much less than that, if I turned him away." He crossed the room, taking her hand in his. "And because you are my wife, and I want our children to be *ours*. Not torn between. Not hiding." He smiled. "At least, not from us."

Meixiang smiled back, and reached up for him-

"Don't watch!" Jia whispered.

"I'm not watching!" Suyin protested. "Jia!"

Hands still entwined, Tingzhe joined his beloved in rueful laughter. "Hold that thought?" Meixiang murmured.

"I suppose we must." Shaking his head, Tingzhe turned toward the sound of irritable voices... or rather, one raised voice, and one trying to soothe what didn't want to be soothed.

"-Look, just - do something to quiet it for a while!" Shirong's voice neared the curtain and set of raised rock screens currently serving as a front door and entryway. "I have to do my job, we're at war-"

"And were you just a Dai Li serving under Long Feng, I might give you exactly what you ask for," Amaya said tartly. "But you are not. And we're not at war, we're hiding. Which means I can, and will, take the measures needed to heal you properly. Tui and La - that was a fox! What if you'd been a breath slower? What if it hadn't been alone? *In*."

"I'd like to know how that fox found you in the first place," Tingzhe said dryly, as the scowling agent rounded the last screen. "It's a very large city up there. What are the odds?"

"Better than average," the agent admitted, as Amaya followed him in. "Lee healed me. And any bending leaves a mark the spirits can read."

"What he's not saying is, given what Lee healed him from, he *glows*," Amaya said plainly. "If that fox were looking for anything connected to Lee, it couldn't miss him. Jinhai is the only other person in this city who might draw it as strongly." She gave Shirong a stern look. "So if you won't take proper care for yourself, at least think of him."

Looking at the sleep-mumbling young boy, Shirong drew a deep breath. Covered his face with his hands, and let it sigh out. "Forgive me. I'm just - it's - spirits, how do they stand it? I feel as if I'm going to jump out of my own skin-" He cut himself off.

"Or set something on fire?" Meixiang finished. "Sit down. Breathe. You're safe."

"No one's ever safe," Shirong muttered. But sat.

Suyin swallowed, letting Jia have the book. "Lee said his temper was *his* problem."

"It is," Meixiang nodded. "Lee has a dragon's rage. What he must fight every day to contain it, I can only imagine. But all firebenders have a temper. To someone who grew up solid as earth, I imagine it's quite a shock."

Shirong gave a strangled laugh. "That's one way to put it." Straightening his shoulders, he leaned back a little on the stone bench. "So how does Lee fight his?"

"He meditates," Tingzhe answered. And waited for the explosion.

"He *meditates*?" Shirong repeated, incredulous. "He said most firebenders do, but... Are we talking about the same young man? Lee? Snarls at Dai Li, glares down the Earth King over a bear, jumps *deliberately* into a haima-jiao's reach? And you want me to believe *he* meditates? When a spirit's *not* trying to eat him?"

"Think what he'd be like without it," Amaya said wryly.

Shirong paused. Paled. Shivered a bit, and looked over them all. "Lee meditates."

"You should hear Jinhai whine about it," Jia smirked. "Lee won't teach him anything unless he shows he can breathe, first." At her mother's look, she ducked her head. "Well, he does! 'I have bad habits, you need to have good ones'. Lee doesn't let him get away with *anything*."

"Which is not always the best way to learn," Tingzhe mused. "But we are not yet somewhere we can afford for Jinhai to make mistakes." He regarded the agent. "I can show you the proper form. Lee was very insistent that I know, in case... something went wrong."

Reluctantly, Shirong nodded. Glanced at Amaya. "But it's not just temper. If it were only being angry I wouldn't be asking for help. It's - spirits, I don't even know myself anymore. My heart moves and my mind scrambles to keep up, I'm not *like* this, I-" He took a breath. "I knew, when I saw it, exactly why your hidden folk knelt like that. I *knew*. And I've never..." His hands trembled, fisting on his lap. "Kuei's... not *mine*. I've served as a Dai Li for two decades, and I can't feel that he's... how could I *do* that?"

"Loyalty isn't logic," Meixiang said gently. "It's like love. You can choose who you associate with. You can keep people at a distance, long enough to know if they're worthy of a closer look. You can decide what you will do, if you feel that first pull toward another's fire." She smiled at her husband. "But sometimes you meet someone, and you see they embody all the virtues you've been raised to hold as sacred and honored. And you *know*."

Tingzhe gazed back, devoutly hoping he wasn't blushing like a schoolboy. He'd been a far younger scholar when he'd first met a beautiful young refugee whose calligraphy was clear, clean, and fast enough to win her a job as a library scribe. Younger, but not a young man, and painfully aware of how many wealthy students strutted like peacocks to catch Meixiang's eye. And also aware that he was a teacher of the university, and it would never, ever be appropriate to even *seem* to be pressuring a young lady who also served that institution...

The first go-between's letter had been like solstice dawn.

"On the purely practical side," Amaya put in quietly, "Lee is a very strong firebender. And he was there when you needed him." She paused. "And when I heal you... I can feel you're an orphan. Either they're dead, or they've kept apart. There's no one left to care what happens to you."

"The war took most of my family," Shirong said bitterly. "And go near the ones left, with my luck? I'm not that cruel. What has that got to do with anything?"

"We need clans," Meixiang explained. "It's horrible, to be unclanned. Loyalty to a lord helps, but without family? We're alone. We're threatened. We're *afraid*." She regarded him steadily. "And when you're afraid *and* angry... Shirong, let us help."

"Help?" the agent said warily.

"They've discussed it with me," Amaya nodded. "In my opinion as a healer of spirit-wounds - it can't hurt. And I think it could help."

"What could?" Shirong said, even more wary.

"Mom and Dad want to adopt you," Suyin blurted out.

Shirong blinked.

"You're already living here anyway," Jia said bluntly. "You're a firebender, Jinhai's a firebender - it'll be a lot easier to hide that we're weird if we're all weird together."

"Jia," Meixiang sighed.

"Well, it's true," Jia said defensively. "Think about Min, Mom! He tries to be like the other guys, but he's *not*. And I don't know if that's you, or Dad, or both. You know how many other fathers teach their daughters earthbending? *Not* many. Most boys Min's age? They can trap a girl if they want to, and they *know* it. So we never, ever go with boys alone. Min's *polite*. Maybe he thinks that's a bad thing now, but if he can keep his head a little longer? Smart girls are going to be pounding down Dad's door with matchmakers and go-betweens. If their parents are smart enough

to let them."

Shirong chuckled. "They may be too late."

Tingzhe thought of an expressionless girl with hurt gold eyes, and shook his head. *Like father, like son, they say.*

Well. If that were true, Meixiang's proposal had even more merit than he'd thought. "Apparently this is a matter of instinct and emotion, as well as conscious thought," Tingzhe stated. "Firebenders need a clan; you and Jinhai are firebenders, and you have no family. Meixiang has suggested we create a clan, for both your sakes." He gave the agent a wry, sad smile. "You don't mind being our younger brother, do you? I lost mine on the Wall years past, and Meixiang lost... everyone. She knows your pain."

"Create a clan," Shirong repeated, stunned. "Is that possible?"

"We are born of war, as well as fire," Meixiang said soberly. "Every educated woman is taught this ritual. In case there are no survivors, of you or your love's people, and everything must start over." She raised her chin. "Though I am amending it. My husband is of earth. We will be earth and fire. None of my children should ever feel they have nowhere to go." She winked. "I promise, it'll only hurt a little."

Shirong looked at her, and the wine, and the clean blade wrapped in silk by the cups. "How long will this take?"

"Not long at all. It was meant for emergencies." Standing, Meixiang held out her hand.

Shirong considered them both a long moment more. Nodded, and crossed the room to join them by the altar.

Expectation makes it worse, Tingzhe thought ruefully, wincing at the sting as Meixiang pricked his finger, letting three drops fall into his cup of salted wine. Shirong, and then herself, and then she picked up each cup in turn, pouring and swirling and pouring between them, until no one knew which cup had begun where, and the rich summer scent of grapes hung heavy in the air. The prayer was already written, two precise copies in Meixiang's fine hand; one for the family to keep for Oma, Shu, and Guanyin, the other set afire for Agni with the touch of a match.

Ashes crumbled into their cups, and Meixiang sighed, relieved. Handed a cup to each of them, and raised hers high. "My brother, my husband - to Wen!"

"To Wen!" Tingzhe echoed, trying to ignore the gnawing feeling of stepping off a cliff. This was for his wife, his children, and a good man who was beginning to be his friend. Certainly, there was no reason to-

Blood and wine and salt, and the world crushed him.

"...Tingzhe?" Meixiang's voice, a breath from panic. "Oh Agni, I'll never forgive myself if you-"

"Ow," the professor managed, very precisely. Blinked at the ring of faces around him. "What on earth am I doing on the floor?"

"You all drank, I sensed something, and then..." Lifting a water-gloved hand from his head, Amaya frowned. "How are you feeling?"

Letting Meixiang help him to his feet, Tingzhe considered that. He knew this feeling. From

earthbending. A sense of pressure, of being leaned on... and yet with that, came the oddest sense of strength. Support. *Connection*. "Like the keystone in an arch." Breathing in that strength, he opened his arms to his family.

Children swarmed him, and Tingzhe felt whole.

Min isn't here. He breathed out. But we will find him.

He opened his eyes at the touch of a hand warm as Jinhai's, but far larger. "Welcome home."

Entangled in family, Shirong looked utterly bemused. "I... *thank you* can't possibly be enough."

"You're among clan," Meixiang said gently. "You are always welcome among us." She swallowed. "Oh Agni. I missed this."

"My head feels all tingly," Jia said shakily.

"You'll get used to it."

"It's kind of like having Lee here," Suyin said thoughtfully.

"Yes," Meixiang nodded. "A clan holds your loyalty safe. Like a good lord. We protect each other. And so we do not fear our loyalty will be seized by one unworthy of it; for our clan watches for danger when we falter, and fights when we can fight no more." She looked down at the sleepy little boy clinging to her waist. "Jinhai?"

"So if Uncle Shirong's all better," he yawned, "can we go to sleep now?"

"Excellent idea," Tingzhe concurred.

Though it was a bit more complicated than that. There was an altar to clean, children to sort out and tuck into bedding, one still-stunned agent to get sorted out as well...

And one waterbender to grab for a quick whisper, before she sought her own bed. "I thought you said you'd considered what might happen!" Tingzhe hissed, keeping his voice low.

"I did. At least, what I'd seen of Agni's interference," Amaya said plainly. "I didn't realize that other spirits might be just as sympathetic."

"What?"

Amaya smiled wryly, humming a few bars of the catchiest, most annoyingly frustrating song that had ever gotten stuck in Tingzhe's head.

Two lovers, forbidden from one another. A war divides their people...

Cold floor, Min Wen registered, blinking. Wait, shouldn't be on the floor, was on spy duty on the audience chamber, watching the Fire Princess-

Inhumanly wide gray blinked at him. Giggled, close enough to feel warm breath across his nose.

"Gaah!"

Ty Lee flipped off her hands and onto her feet, still grinning as he scrambled back as far as the

hidden nook in the wall would let him, trying to calm his racing heart. "Oh good, you're okay!" She looked him up and down, and - impossibly - brightened further. "Better than okay! That's great!"

"Geh?" Min managed, trying to wriggle free of an insanely flexible hug.

Ty Lee let go, turning her smile down to moon-bright from blinding. "Your aura. It's so much brighter! Wherever your family went, they must be okay."

"How would you know if my family's-" Words died on Min's lips.

My family's okay.

Not just words. He was sure of it. Somehow.

They're okay, and they miss me.

Solid earth under his feet. A warm hearth. Home.

Min stood up, nerving himself. Ty Lee was the enemy, even if she was Mai's friend. But still... "Do you know what just happened?"

"Sure," Ty Lee said perkily. "I just found out why Azula can't pull you and Quan in. It's been *bugging* her."

Erk. Min swallowed dryly. *Oh, this is not good, really not good-*

"It's funny. And a little sad." Ty Lee shook her head. "Zuko came into the palace a couple of times, didn't he? And you both met him."

"Agent Quan already told the princess we didn't know who he was," Min said carefully.

"Oh, you didn't *know* know," Ty Lee nodded. "But you *knew*." She patted pink ruffles over her heart. "That's why it's sad. He'd dead now, you know."

He couldn't have just heard what he thought he'd heard. He *couldn't* have. "...What?"

"He got in Azula's way. He helped the Avatar's friends, instead of her. Against the Fire Lord's orders." She shrugged, a fluid flow of movement. "Zuko's a firebender. He's not like Mai, who can get better. He's dead."

Min looked into cheerful gray eyes, and felt chilled. "And you don't care."

"I said it's sad." For a moment, she glanced down. "But he got in Azula's way. That's what happens."

For a moment, Min tried to picture that. Tried to imagine what it must have been, to have for your sister... someone who made things *happen*.

"She tried to make it quick," Ty Lee went on. "But I guess he picked up General Iroh's trick... I feel sorry for him. Lu Ten died here, and now he had to watch it happen to Zuko, and traitors' deaths are *awful*. Poor General Iroh."

There wasn't room to get away. He edged back anyway, longing to bend his way out rather than stay.

I've got orders. Agent Quan's counting on me to help watch Azula. I have to.

And there Quan was. Mai behind him, he approached Azula as she sat on the royal throne, gold eyes glittering above her robe of Earth green. Bowed, stiffly, barely glancing at silent guards. "You sent for me, your highness?"

"You're still here," Azula mused. "I have to wonder. Is that bravery? Or stupidity?"

"You could consider practicality," Quan said levelly. "You hold the Dai Li. Where could I possibly run that you couldn't find me?"

"What a coincidence," Azula said silkily. "I was just wondering the same thing."

Even hidden by stone, Min shivered.

"Ba Sing Se is truly a marvelous city," Azula mused. "Above and below. Do you know, I've been questioning the Dai Li, and no two of them come up with the same map?" Her gaze sharpened.

"Where is Agent Shirong?"

"I don't know," Quan said levelly.

"And here's the interesting part," Azula said thoughtfully. "I believe you. You don't know where he is. *No one* knows where he is. So tell me. In an organization that obeyed the will of one man, where *every* Dai Li works with a partner, why does no one know where this man might have gone?"

Quan let out a slow breath. "Your majesty. Shirong hasn't worked with a partner in years. He has... bad luck. It's safer to keep your distance."

Azula's eyes narrowed. "Benders make their own luck, Agent Quan."

"Maybe firebenders can," Quan said levelly. "We're not that skilled."

"You could be right," Azula said casually. "It would certainly explain my brother. And I have a great deal of interest in explaining my brother, Agent Quan. He may have been a traitor and a failure, but my father will still expect a full and complete account of the circumstances surrounding his death."

"His death?" Quan's eyes were cold. "Did you kill him, your highness?"

"He killed himself, and you know it," Azula said levelly. "My brother always was an idealistic fool." Gold gleamed. "What I want to know is, how far did he spread his poison? How did he do it at all without the Dai Li realizing *exactly* what he was?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, your highness."

"And we were having such a civilized conversation," Azula sighed. "Don't start lying to me now. Fire is loyalty and life; the Dai Li well know that, having broken so many of the Fire Nation to die. My brother healed Shirong; Shirong chose him over Long Feng." Lethal red nails tapped the arm of the throne. "Don't tell me you never connected the dots."

Out of the corner of his eye, Min saw Ty Lee's jaw drop. In the audience chamber, Mai went still.

They didn't know, Min realized. *Whatever Azula's talking about, they didn't know*. And just what was she talking about? She couldn't mean what it sounded like...

"Your healers can touch a man's loyalty," Quan said, half to himself. "I'm surprised the Wall didn't

fall decades ago."

"You're not that innocent," Azula smiled coldly. "You know exactly why the Fire Lord can't leave anyone with that power alive. So I'll ask you one more time. Who else did my brother heal? Besides the stupid bear." She sniffed. "I knew the Earth King was blind to his people's worth, but to miss my brother firebending in front of him-

Quan smiled bitterly. "He used hot water."

Elegant nostrils flared. "What did you say?"

Quan met her gaze squarely, grimly amused. "I'm saying, your highness, that you're not the only one who can use a disguise. No one noticed your brother because he made himself look like what he *was*; a refugee and an outcast, fleeing the Fire Nation. No facepaint, no weapons, no brave uniform. Just a waterskin and a firepot, and a story thin enough we all knew it was a lie. But we never came near the truth. After all, we know what the Fire Nation teaches about *lesser elements*. What great name would *ever* pretend to be a waterbender?"

Gracefully, Azula stood. Took a few steps down the dais, until her gaze was level with Quan's.

And smirked.

Spots flashed in Min's vision. He gulped air, making himself breathe.

"You really don't think you're the first person to try to goad me into killing him, do you?" Azula said, gently chiding. "Though I am impressed. A man in so much pain, so *lost* without the commander he was loyal to. And you're still standing." She shook her head slightly. "Someone must have given you hope. How very... cruel of them." Her voice hardened. "Ty Lee. Bring him."

"Do you want to walk?" Ty Lee said brightly. "Or, you know..." She wiggled her fingers.

"Walk," Min managed to get out. "I'll walk."

It felt like walking into acid. His heartbeat drummed in his ears, and all he could see were eyes. Dark brown, full of pain, made fresh by the realization there *was* something left to lose. Gold that should be his enemy, that he knew never would be again, shadowed by the same horror. And in front of him...

Gold as the sun, and far more pitiless. "You're not human," Min whispered.

"My, my. You have met my brother." Azula smiled, as if at a fond memory. "Do you know, he tried to tell people? But - well, you know, sibling rivalry. Fire Lord Sozin's line is the blood of *heroes*. Why, just look at all we've done for the world." She focused on him. "Where is your family, Trainee Min Wen?"

The only way to keep a secret from her, is not to know it. Spirits, if he lived through this, he was going to listen when Dad told him *I told you so*. And he was going to *like* it. "I don't know," Min got out. And didn't try to hide how his voice shook.

"I suppose it doesn't really matter," Azula mused. "After all, I don't need to find them. They'll find you."

Min froze. Swallowed, and made himself look at her. "My father's a historian at Ba Sing Se University. He knows what the Fire Nation can do. And he never wanted me to be Dai Li. He *won't come*."

"Yes he will." Ruby nails slashed out, caught his chin in a clawed grip. "You may call yourself an earthbender, but I know what you are. I can *feel* you."

Fire. Spirits, it felt like he was burning from the inside out, she was too strong, he couldn't bear it-
Help me!

A surge of strength, shielding his faltering heart. Min blinked. Breathed.

Gazed back into gold eyes, like staring into the face of an avalanche. *If I'm going to die - spirits, let me do it standing.*

"The strength of a clan," Azula said dryly. "My uncle left quite a mark. I'll have to speak with him about that, when I see him. It's so *rude* to create a line of loyalty that avoids the Dragon Throne. Why, even the Avatar would have said it was treason." Stepping back, she waved to the guards.

He managed to deflect the first stone gloves. But not the tenth.

"I asked for an assurance of your good behavior, Agent Quan," Azula stated, looking at the man now all but strangled in iron chains. "I think I'll take this one."

"What makes you think I care what happens to one boy?" Quan said coldly.

"You should." Azula raised a hand; a teacher, instructing a particularly slow pupil. "You have a firebender's killer instinct. And their weakness. You need to be loyal. And Long Feng is dead. You'd never stand against me... unless you were drawing strength from somewhere else." She nodded at the guards. "Mai. See that he's taken back to his quarters. I think the agent needs time to reflect on his duties. And his loyalty."

Stone shut behind them, and Min gulped. "Agent Quan will never betray our city. It doesn't matter if you kill me." *Oh, damn, that was stupid-*

"Oh, I have no intention of killing *you*."

Min stared at her, chilled to the bone.

"Fools believe in spirits. I believe in power." Azula smiled at him, gently chiding. "You really should meet my father. From the moment he knew I was his true heir, he taught me about the inner fire. How to seek it. How to *use* it. And how to know how others arrange theirs. You think you're Dai Li? Then you're not loyal to my uncle. Which means, at your age, it must be one of your parents." She shrugged, as if it were of no importance. "I'll have to kill them both, to be sure."

He didn't want to move. He didn't want to *breathe*.

"Then your brother and sisters," Azula went on, still smiling. "You're old enough to head a clan, after all. We can't have that. I wonder; should I give you a few days with them, first? Let you feel everything you were born to feel, everything you long to protect, before I take them away?"

Somewhere, Min found the will to whisper. "Monster..."

"Oh, you haven't even heard the best part!" Azula smirked. "Which comes when I leave you *alive*. And alone. With no one to be loyal to... but me."

No. Spirits, no.

"Take him out of my sight." Azula turned away, and shrugged at Ty Lee. "Well, that was fun."

How's the rest of the occupation going?"

The minute Huojin walked into the station and saw red-and-black armor, he knew it was going to be a bad night.

Fair's fair. The whole city's having bad nights. Ever since they brought the Walls down... spirits, I never thought that would happen.

Which was one reason why he and his family were still living aboveground, instead of vanishing like so many others. They'd made preparations. The Wens were holding a bunch of supplies for them for when they finally did bolt. But someone needed to be eyes and ears in the city as long as possible... and his fellow Guards needed all the help they could get.

He hesitated going past the soldiers to join the rest of the ghost watch. Who wouldn't? But Captain An Lu-shan was there by a cold-faced, salt-and-pepper haired Fire Nation sergeant; grumpy and grim as Huojin had ever seen him. Damned if he'd let the captain down now.

The intruder waited as a few stragglers filtered in, hand on a stack of papers that looked suspiciously like the station's personnel files. "Is this everyone, Captain?"

"Yes," Lu-shan said flatly. "We can call roll, if you like."

"That won't be necessary tonight," the soldier stated. "Tomorrow. So anyone who might have had unavoidable business elsewhere has a chance to hear we're not inclined to roast you all alive."

Huojin squinted, but still couldn't tell if the man was joking.

"I am Master Sergeant Yakume," the Fire Nation soldier announced to the crowd of Guards. "I've been detailed here to ensure the laws of Ba Sing Se continue to be enforced, as they have been in the past."

Huojin raised an eyebrow.

"This isn't my first such detail, so I'll clear a few things up right now," Yakume said grimly. "I *don't like you*. You're Earth Kingdom. You have habits and customs I, and all of my people, find offensive at best. On the other hand, I am well aware you find us unnatural, and you tell your children to behave or the firebenders will roast and eat them. That, is false. We are not murderers, we are *soldiers*. If I had my way, no child would ever be on a battlefield." Gold eyes swept them all, measuring and grim. "We are also not fools. Anyone who hides behind a child to perform acts of sabotage or sedition is condemning that child to death *with them*. Do we understand each other?"

You could have heard a pebble drop.

"Good," Yakume said quietly. "Do not interfere with soldiers performing their duties. It's been a long siege, and no one is in a good mood. *However*. Any incident of law-breaking by our soldiers, you *will* report to me. And I will *deal* with it. I have a wife and children in the colonies; anyone who lays disgraceful hands on a civilian is not worthy of his uniform." Another sweep of gold eyes. "I don't like you. That doesn't mean I hate you. Keeping the peace is a hard and thankless job, and anyone who does it well has earned some respect. Do your jobs, use your heads, and we'll all go home at the end of the day."

He's good, Huojin thought, watching carefully as the master sergeant inclined his head to the captain, and stepped out of the way of the station's business. *Just keep doing your jobs, never mind*

us taking over... Heck, we let the Dai Li run us, what's the difference besides the uniform? That's what a lot of people will think, until it's too late- uh-oh. The captain was beckoning him over to them. And he couldn't pretend he hadn't seen it.

Keep it together. Huojin took a deep breath, and walked over to his captain. "Sir?"

Yakume held up a ribbon-bound bundle of papers. "I believe we need to talk."

Funny, how the interrogation room always looks different from this side of the table, Huojin thought whimsically, as Yakume laid his file bundle down between them. The master sergeant didn't look upset... well, not more than he had already. And Huojin still had his sword. But... *This is not good.*

"I understand you're acquainted with Healer Amaya," Yakume said plainly.

"So's half the Lower Ring, and a lot of the farms," Huojin answered, just as blunt. "She's been here... almost thirty-one years now, I think. People know her."

"And they'd be willing to protect her." Yakume's gaze was level.

"I haven't seen her since the clinic got closed," Huojin said plainly. "I thought the Dai Li got her. She always worried about them. *She* knew the war was out there." He shrugged. "If they don't have her, I hope she's okay."

"Hmm." Yakume nodded slightly. "And have you seen these men before?"

The wanted poster was a shock. Huojin didn't try to hide it; just pulled the paper closer to study the portraits. *So that's General Iroh, topknot and all. And...* "Kid looks a lot more human with hair." He met Yakume's gaze, deliberately. "If you have the Dai Li reports, you know I know them."

"Tell me anyway." From the chill in Yakume's eyes, it wasn't a suggestion.

"Not much to say," Huojin said bluntly. "I rotate onto the docks at least a few days every other week. Captain Lu-shan likes to be sure we're all familiar with different trouble spots. About a month back, I spotted a ruckus over at the incoming desk, with these two in the middle of it. The kid healed a woman on the ferry, and the bureaucrats were frothing at the mouth 'cause he saved a life without a license." Huojin rolled his eyes. "They looked about done in, and to be honest? Kind of scared. So I cut a little red tape and took them straight to Amaya. She decided he was good enough to train, his uncle got a job making tea, and that's pretty much what I know about them."

Was it his imagination, or had gold eyes creased with a little humor when he mentioned Iroh and tea?

If they had, it was gone the next instant. "I'd hardly call Prince Zuko a *kid*," Yakume said coldly. "And you," he tapped the poster, "are *not* surprised."

Oops. "No, Master Sergeant," Huojin said, trying to salvage what he could. "The Avatar's little bunch described the prince pretty... vividly."

Gold eyes fixed on him, razor-sharp. "You knew Prince Zuko was in the city *before* Princess Azula overthrew Long Feng."

So that's the story? Huh. Might even be true. "Yes, I did."

Yakume studied him. "And you didn't have him arrested."

"He didn't break any laws," Huojin shrugged.

Yakume raised a skeptical brow.

"If there were a law against being Fire Nation in Ba Sing Se, your whole army would have warrants out on them," Huojin said wryly. "It'd be *stupid*, but somebody in the government would be brainless enough to pull that. But there's not. He was a healer's apprentice. He wasn't any trouble. Well... not much," Huojin amended, thinking of Lee's terse account of dumping Jet the fanatic off a bison, hopefully far from Ba Sing Se.

"None of which would have mattered if you'd told the Earth Army he was here," Yakume observed.

Good point. Damn. "Well, I guess the Avatar just caught me on a *bad day*," Huojin snarled. Jerked a nod toward his file. "You've read that? Then you know Amaya picked me up off the streets. I was six, I was alone, my parents were *gone*, and I was about one hungry night away from getting mixed up with bad, *bad* people. She faced down a crowd of those weevil-rats and got me out of there. She helped me grow up, into the Guard. She was at my wedding, and she's Auntie to my daughters. I *love* that woman. And now she's gone, and the whole Wen family is gone, and my wife and kids just barely got out before the Dai Li crashed down on the Wens. Because the *Avatar* decided to tear through Ba Sing Se to get his bison back." He waved an angry hand toward the wall, and all the Outer Ring beyond it. "You've been out there. You've seen what it's like. Life is *hard* down here. We get the refugees, and there aren't enough jobs, and most of the good men go fight on the Wall. Which leaves us between good citizens and the scum. The Avatar's out to save the world? Oma and Shu, we could've used a little saving down here!"

Yakume was carefully silent.

Damn temper. Huojin yanked it back by his fingernails, taking a minute to just breathe. "I didn't know *Prince Zuko*. But I damn sure knew Lee, Amaya's apprentice. Who saved my neck in a dark alley when a ninety-nine-year spirit tried to eat me. Who stood between rocks and my kids, when a bunch of brainless noble earthbenders started throwing their weight around because they *could*." He shrugged. "And the Avatar ticked me off."

"Hmm." And that was a smile, faint as dawn's first light. "I see."

"Master Sergeant?" Huojin said warily.

"Try not to have any more bad days," the soldier advised. "That will be all."

I missed something there. I just know it.

Huojin was still puzzling over that as he headed back to his desk, halted only by the captain's somber look. "Well?" Lu-shan asked.

"He wanted to know about Amaya's apprentice," Huojin said frankly.

The captain frowned. "You're still calling him that?"

"It's what the kid I knew was, sir." Huojin shrugged. "If the war hadn't gone this way, he'd still *be* here. Helping."

For a moment, the captain looked as if he'd swallowed a live catfish-eel. Shook it off, and warily waved him back to work.

Pausing by his desk, Huojin checked that there wasn't any new paperwork that needed seeing to before he met up with the rest of his patrol for the night. And took a moment for one frustrated thought.

Damn it, Lee, where are you?

Out at last, Teruko thought wryly, watching over her younger charge as he burrowed further under his blankets. The heat in their expanded shelter was gentle, nowhere near the stifling heat the prince's illness had required, but he finally looked like he'd shaken off the shock. Though having one lump of huge dark feathers curled up alongside him might have something to do with that.

Better you than me, the marine thought frankly, as Asahi's quiet snores buzzed in the air. Literally; the prince's reflexes apparently categorized the ostrich-horse as *safe*. Another human being wouldn't be so lucky.

And what that told her about the prince's life so far... she didn't like it. At all.

Satisfied there were enough marines between Zuko at this end and the shelter door at the front to at least have a *chance* of catching him, Teruko retreated toward the door, stopping at the desk-like nook Toph had shaped. Where her second charge studied maps, tracing possible paths through the water to Ba Sing Se. "General." She kept her voice low; no need to spread this beyond clan. "Why doesn't the prince know what he is?"

Iroh arched a gray brow at her. "*What* he is, Lieutenant?"

"Byakko, sir. I know the stories." She eyed him. "You and I both know, the Avatar knew the Shidan *we* know. Just - not on two feet."

"I had thought it was only a legend," Iroh said quietly.

She couldn't help it; she stared at him. "Sir. He stalks. He was a *difficult birth*. He's got nails steel won't scratch. A temper so bad he loses words. Agni, I'd lay odds he didn't even bend until he was six!"

"Eight," Iroh said frankly.

"Orochi's eight drinks," Teruko swore. *Worse than I thought. Way worse.*

Iroh was watching her very carefully. "My brother believed this meant Zuko would never be a powerful bender."

I don't believe it. The Fire Lord's an idiot. "Sir... dragons take a *long time* to grow up." She shook her head, feeling as if someone had yanked a rug out from under her. "Eight. Agni, it's a wonder the kid didn't *hatch*."

Iroh nodded slightly, as if she'd confirmed something he'd puzzled out. "You have some experience with late benders?"

"Sir. There are no firebenders recorded as having first bent later than five in Byakko," Teruko said steadily.

"I see," Iroh murmured. "Of course, the government ceases to examine children past the age of five. For those few who do bend late are usually brought to official attention by their parents, so

they may catch up with their training as soon as possible."

"So I've heard, sir-" Teruko whirled toward the wall, fist up and ready.

"Whoa! Truce," came the tense whisper. Sand parted like falling water, and Toph stepped free. "I was just coming to check up on Sparky."

"In the middle of the night?" Teruko hissed.

"Oh, how awful! I can't see a thing!" Toph smirked.

Teruko smacked herself in the forehead.

"It is all right." Iroh raised his voice, just enough for nervous marines to hear and stand down.

"Toph is free to visit as she wishes." He lowered it again. "Should I ask how much you have heard?"

"Um... well..." The little earthbender leaned to listen the prince's way, and swallowed hard.

"Dragons? You're... dragons?"

Teruko frowned at her. "You sound like you believe it."

Toph tilted her head, then held out a hand. "Wrist. Gimme."

Teruko shrugged, and let Toph wrap fingers above her hand, under her armor. It was always a little weird, touching someone from another nation. They just weren't warm.

"You're hot," Toph said plainly. "Not a lot, but - if I was this hot, Mom would have me in bed with soup. But you're not sick. And... your pulse is *slow*. It's one of the things that fooled me about Sparky 'til I had a chance to listen to him. When he's scared? He feels like Sokka, when Snoozles is just a little worried. He had to be telling us about Azula or smack in the middle of a dozen Dai Li before I felt it really pick up. Little animals have fast hearts. Big ones are *slow*. It's like... you're a lot bigger than you really are." She let her hand slip down to grip Teruko's fingers. "And what you said about rocks... whoa."

At the general's intrigued look, Teruko shrugged. "My clan's ancestor is a lot farther back than the prince's, sir. But I come by the temper honestly."

Toph was feeling her nails, pressing her own fingers against trimmed edges until they dented skin.

"So... Zuko doesn't know this is weird, because for you guys, it's *not*."

"And because, it would seem, no one who knew of his heritage told him," Iroh nodded.

"We better tell him something, sir," Teruko said bluntly. "And make him believe it. He was out there doing *fire-rain*."

Iroh blinked. "Oh dear."

Toph grinned, eager. "You can make rain burn?"

"Frost, no, I can't," Teruko admitted. "But Byakko knows how to do it."

"As I understand it, the water does not actually burn," Iroh informed the girl. "But lightning and fire are kin, and falling from the sky, all rain carries a whisper of lightning. It is that a bender seizes, to flare into fire."

"So... you can't do it either," Toph said thoughtfully. "Uh-oh. Does Sparky know?" She paused, and shook her head. "Nope, he'd have flattened the whole camp if he did, right?"

"I would like to believe he would show restraint, even in such distress," Iroh said heavily. "But I fear you are right. Did he know, his words to Aang would have been far more painful."

Teruko looked between them, unsettled. "Wait. If you didn't know he was a dragon-child..."

Iroh weighed her in his gaze, and released a quiet breath. "Do you believe in ties that can hold even beyond death, Lieutenant?"

Teruko's eyes widened. "You mean, like when Usagi was trapped by the oni-wife, and Lord Mifune's ghost cut her down to save him?"

"You guys have got to tell me these stories," Toph breathed. "Mom always said ghosts were just cold spots and rattling windows and dreams, and maybe a shadow that kept you from stepping on a snake."

"As are most of ours," Iroh nodded. "It is rare that a ghost has power enough to touch our world. Though I have heard of a few. But other stories claim there *is* a way to return to those who have desperate need of you. Though it is a grave risk. For one forgets... and who can say if the spirits will pierce the veil, and grant even a hint to tell you why you are caught in a web of fate you do not remember weaving?"

Teruko sighed, feeling a deep sympathy for the prince. Dragon-child or not, *anybody* would want to beat their head against the wall if their teacher kept springing stuff that indirect on them-

He's the prince's teacher. And he doesn't know Byakko forms... and the prince does...

Teruko sat down on sandstone, not sure her knees would hold her. "He... came back? To this life?"

"My nephew has always been brave," Iroh said quietly. Smiled, bittersweet, at Toph's confusion. "The Fire Sages say that before one chooses to leave their rest in the spirit world, they are warned of where their choice may lead. Not of all, no spirit knows everything... but of likely outcomes. And of pain."

Toph gulped. "So... Kuzon knew?"

"Enough. Yes."

Teruko felt like gulping herself, marine discipline or not. *Kuzon died almost eighteen years back... and the prince is... oh, Agni.* "Are you sure?"

"Spirits can lie," Iroh said wryly. "But given that in the spirit world Gyatso claimed my nephew promised to find Aang and drag him home, and in the midst of his fever my nephew called for his uncle, Kuroyama of Byakko..."

Who'd been dead near a hundred years now. Teruko swallowed, and tried to still shaking hands.

"Yeah. Fever." Toph scowled at the general. "You going to tell me about that now? Or do dragons and lightning just not mix?"

"It was the dragon, not the lightning," Iroh hesitated. "Toph. I meant what I told you. Those of other nations are often horrified when they learn of this. And, worse than horror, there is... pity."

Toph cocked her head, and moved in for a hug. "You're good people, Uncle. Maybe I can't bang that into people's heads yet, but I'm not ever gonna feel sorry for you."

"I pray you are right." Iroh sighed. "In the desert, I told you my nephew was still loyal to his father. To aid you and rescue Appa, he tread on the very edges of that loyalty; it is a prince's duty to prevent military disasters, if he can, and allowing Long Feng to unleash the Avatar on our siege would have been that." He paused. "To save your lives from Azula, who he knew acted in Fire Lord Ozai's name... he broke it."

Teruko shivered at the very thought. Agni, even if you knew down to your soul what you were doing was right... *I'm not sure I'd have the guts.*

Toph was silent, toes curling against the floor as she paled. "You mean... it didn't matter if she zapped him. Just helping us, helping Aang... oh, Sparky..."

Iroh held her as she shivered, biting her lip not to cry. "It is over now. You helped us, and he lived."

"And I thought *truce* was bad," Toph gulped. "When you guys say *loyalty*..."

"Ah, yes. We mean the bonds of fire and spirit to one's clan, one's lord, and one's followers," Iroh nodded. "For what you mean by loyalty in the Earth Kingdom, we use several words. Coin-hire, for employer and employed; in which category, I am sad to say, some of your army falls. Love of country; that is something we both understand. Discipline, for those in a chain of command. There is friendship, alliance..." He lifted a shoulder, and let it fall. "I could go on for quite some time."

"Please don't, sir," Teruko groaned. Thought, for a lip-nibbling moment. "Toph... loyalty is having somewhere you belong. And people you'd walk through fire for." She grinned. "Though for some of us, that's easier than others."

"Only if we do something awful to someone we care about, it doesn't kill us." Toph shuddered. "You've got to tell Aang."

"And what should we tell him?" Iroh said softly. "That we are, in truth, what Katara names us? Inhuman monsters?"

"...I don't know," Toph admitted. "I have to think about this. But we've got to figure out something. Aang still thinks things are okay." She tapped her toes on stone. "So how do I find Byakko?"

"You wish to visit Lady Kotone's domain?" Iroh asked, outwardly mild. "I was not exaggerating. Zuko is her grandson. She will not be pleased."

"She won't be glad to see Aang," Toph shrugged. "Maybe she won't want to see me, either. But if I tell Shidan Aang's back... It's worth a try." She pointed at Teruko. "And I want to see those rocks of yours."

Smart kid, Teruko thought, approving. *And stubborn*. "You know, sir, if they want to get there quietly, rocks would be the way to go. If they walk around asking for Byakko, people would wonder. But if they ask what's the best way to go see Mount Shirotoora..."

"It is a wonder in any season," Iroh nodded.

"Fire Nation people go to see a mountain?" Toph said skeptically.

"A mountain tall enough to have *ice* on top," Teruko stated. "That's something special." She lowered her voice, and leaned close. "And if the mountain really, really likes you... you might see

the *yamabushi*."

"The mountain sages?" Iroh glanced at her, intrigued. "I had thought their order all but extinct."

"They've been up there over a thousand years," Teruko shrugged. "Not a lot of people join them, but they get by. They're weird, but if it weren't for them, we wouldn't still have fire-rain. They saw Kyoshi's storm coming. It wasn't much time... but we got some people to higher ground." She shrugged again, and tried not to hold her breath.

Toph started to say something, then stopped. Thought. Pursed her lips, and let out a slow, amazed, "Huh." Smirked. "So Sparky comes by the sneaky honestly."

"You better believe it," Teruko grinned. "Um. No offense, General. I'm sure you can be stealthy. When you want to be."

"I begin to believe I am in the presence of masters," Iroh mused. "And to speak of masters..." He raised a brow at Teruko.

"Not sure I can give you a good estimate, sir," the marine answered frankly. "I was still a kid when he died. But he trained Lady Kotone, and I *know* she's good."

"You want to know how good a bender Kuzon was?" Toph frowned. "You're a general. Can't you just look up his record?"

"Even if I had access to more of our records than are kept on *Suzuran*, Kuzon would not be in them," Iroh said frankly. "As lord of Byakko, with so few living kindred, he managed to avoid going to war. Directly, at least. He was in... intelligence. Kuzon traveled throughout the world, and Byakko has many trade contacts, and the Fire Lord sought information from all of them. And I will not say that information was *not* harmful as any fire." He smiled ruefully. "Yet given what I know now, I suspect not all the information the Fire Lord sought reached him. And that, likely, is what finally brought Kuzon's death." Iroh stroked his beard. "Still. He was ninety-eight, and as hale as I am. Which is very nearly information enough."

Toph frowned. "Huh?"

Iroh blinked. "Your teacher did not mention how benders age?"

"The guy my parents *thought* was tutoring me? Thought I could barely move rocks," Toph said, disgusted. "My *teachers* were badger-moles."

"Ah," Iroh said, very quietly. "Well. Strong benders move their chi, and smooth its flow; I have let my discipline slip these past few years, which I must remedy... If we are diligent, and practice, and if nothing kills us - we can live a very long time. Not so long as legend says of the Avatar, who tales grant half a millennium or more, but long. My grandfather, Fire Lord Sozin, was a hundred and fifty-three when he died; and I think that was of grief and loneliness, more than age. Without our cousins of the waves to learn from, we of the Fire Nation are unbalanced, and few reach so many years. But Kuzon would have been among them."

"So... *really* good," Toph concluded. "Why's it matter? Zuko doesn't remember any of it."

"Yes he does," Teruko said soberly. "Fire-rain's a Byakko form. The prince didn't know what it was, and he doesn't know how he knows it - but he *does*."

Toph thought about that. And smirked.

"This is not amusing," Iroh said sternly. "It is not wise for a bender not to know what he is capable of-"

"You're thinking like a firebender, Uncle," Toph said gleefully. "Try some earth and water. Listen. And wait for the punch. Who's Sparky's *biggest* problem? The one that's *not* in this camp?"

Iroh paused. And, quietly, began to laugh. "I see."

"Yep. Crazy blue fire thinks she knows everything?" Toph locked her fingers together, and cracked her knuckles. "Let's see her fight this."

Xiu looked at the unholy trap the general's aide had lured her Pai Sho pieces into, and glared.

Across the board, almost backed up to the army tent wall, graying Sergeant Bo grinned cheerfully at her. "Another game?"

"Not until I figure out how you slaughtered me in this one." Xiu studied the field, retracing moves in her mind. The chariots, and then the ship-tiles, and that weird move with the lotus...

"Ah, a break's good anyway," Bo nodded, standing up to stretch with a yawn, before dropping back down to poke through the chest he'd been sitting on. "Have to do something nice for your boyfriend for letting me do him a favor. We don't get many pretty girls to game with around here." He dropped her a deliberate wink.

Xiu tried not to roll her eyes too obviously. The sergeant was harmless; she'd met enough men like him to know. But that didn't mean he wasn't enjoying the view. "So why are you doing him a favor? There's some kind of meeting going on, right?" And Huizhong was in the middle of it; why did she have a bad feeling about that? "Shouldn't you be with General Gang?"

"Well... that's a story," Bo shrugged, sorting through scrolls. "See, it looks like I'm retiring."

Xiu ran that through her mind a few times. Looked up from the Pai Sho board. "You and the general had an argument?" *A bad one.*

"Something like," Bo nodded. "Now, don't get me wrong, General Gang's a pretty good man. But the war - eh. It's not going so good. I hear you're Tzu's daughter? Good man. So you know, when a soldier thinks his back's to the wall, things get... dicey." He lifted a still-dark brow at her. "Ever hear of General Fong?"

Xiu frowned. "He holds a fort up north, doesn't he?"

"Yep. Welcomed the Avatar back from the North Pole after the Fire Navy went sploosh," Bo told her. "People say the Avatar was training there a while, getting ready to help us invade the Fire Nation. Then? I don't know what happened. Something went wrong, the whole fort got wrecked, and the Avatar's bunch took off for Ba Sing Se." He shook his head. "Now, General Gang, he thinks it was worth it, if the Avatar gets set to do the same thing right on top of the Fire Lord. Me? I kind of wonder." He shrugged. "So, looks like I'm going to get reassigned somewhere quieter. But before I do... here's what you're looking for."

Xiu's eyebrows rose, as she picked up just one of the score of scrolls Bo was placing on the game board. "This... there's all this?"

"Wouldn't see most of it in one place, but as soon as word got out about what happened at the North

Pole? The general asked me to find out what else an Avatar can pull off, mass destruction-wise," Bo stated. "So. You wanted to know if Avatar Kyoshi ever hit the Fire Nation so hard, their ancestors felt it? Yeah. Oh, yeah."

Swallowing hard, Xiu started to read.

She had to put her head down after the third scroll, and just breathe. *I'm not going to cry. I'm not.*

"Bad idea, being home to the pirates that killed one of the Avatar's kids," Bo shrugged. "Bad idea."

Xiu shivered. "Oma and Shu..."

"Funny thing is? I've met a few Fire Nation guys," Bo said thoughtfully. "The good ones? Sweetheart, you wouldn't believe how important family is. Pirate raids are one thing; they think lords should be *strong*, and anybody who can't protect his people is asking for it. But a mom after the guy who killed her kid? Do *not* mess with a Fire mother. They kill you. And if they're feeling *nice*, they do it quick." He looked aside, into the distance. "So I gotta wonder. What would've happened, if Kyoshi hadn't let the Earth King handle yelling at the great names? He hated the Fire Nation, and history says he was a stuck-up royal *bastard*, and..." He shrugged. "What if she hadn't? What if she'd just gone over there like a *mother*, and asked?"

Xiu stared at him. "So... you're retiring."

"Getting transferred. Guess it's pretty much the same thing." Shuffling through the pile, Bo came up with a simple letter-scroll. "You know, we've got a lot of these. Don't think the general would mind if you gave this one to Chief Hakoda. I hear his kids know the Avatar. Bet they'd kind of like hearing how another airbender saw stuff."

Almost against her will, Xiu reached out. Closed her hand on old paper, and wet her lips. "Why?"

"Same reason I'm in here looking after you, lady," Bo said bluntly. "By now? Whole camp knows you were friendly with Hakoda. *And* the Fire Nation kid."

Xiu tried to keep her face calm. "I didn't know who they were."

"You didn't. Too bad for them, that weasel-mink Xiaobo did." Bo laid a tattered poster beside the scrolls.

Xiu looked at inked faces, and felt her heart sink into her sandals. *He's... Lee is...*

"The Fire Lord's son, and the Dragon of the West," Bo said soberly. "General's hitting them right after dawn."

Chapter End Notes

You may notice that the only Fire Nation person in the audience chamber when Azula pulls this on Min is Ty Lee. There's a reason for that. By Fire Nation standards, she's just threatened him with mind-rape. A literal fate worse than death.

Teruko's mention of Usagi and his lord's ghost - this is from an Usagi Yojimbo comic. (Which is also, definitely, not mine. Darn.)

A bit of clarification for chapter 28... and, all my fault, here's a bit of personal culture clash I hadn't realized I'd written in. Way back when Zuko was talking to Tingzhe, he didn't say that he lost eleven men to the Avatar. He said he had to count them because he didn't know all their names - which he didn't, having been rather estranged from the crew until "The Storm". I'm too familiar with the military history use of the term "casualties" - which means people injured, and possibly taken out of the fight, but does not necessarily mean death. With one historian (Tingzhe) and one military commander (Zuko) talking to each other, they each understood what the other meant.

This fic makes liberal use of Hanlon's Razor. "Never attribute to malice what can equally well be explained by stupidity." One act of violence in 1914 left over 8 million dead. And the results of WWI (I recommend looking into the Treaty of Versailles) eventually triggered WWII. Which has repercussions even today.

There are no excuses. There are reasons, but no excuses.

And because a lot of people have asked... Shirong is based off Michael Archangel. From Airwolf.

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"You guys," Sokka couldn't hide a yawn as he eyed fading stars before dawn, "take mornings *way* too seriously."

An expressionless skull faceplate stared back. The spear-armed marine beside the firebender was just as stoic, gold eyes glittering at him.

Sokka rubbed a few last grains of sleep-sand out of his eyes, considering the edged silence around the shelter. *Nobody* should be up at this hour... and maybe that was the whole point. Not enough sleep made you cranky and crazy; just look at that whole mess set off between Katara and Toph months back, with even Aang yelling at the earthbending teacher he'd been searching the whole Earth Kingdom for.

For a moment, he played with the idea of telling Katara that maybe the whole Fire Nation just needed a good, long nap.

...*Nah*.

Shrugging, Sokka eyed the guards. "I'm here to talk to Zuko."

Silence. Utter, angry silence.

I'm getting a bad feeling about this. Put that together with what Dad had woken him up to tell him, making sure Katara *didn't* hear it... "Guys... and ladies if there are any... I really need to talk to him," Sokka said honestly. "My Dad's got a question, and I've got a feeling Healer Amaya could tell us, but she isn't here and we *really* need to know." He paused, judging grim gold. "It's important to the truce."

A flick of a cold gaze, and the firebender nodded slightly.

Sokka stepped into warm air, lit and tasting faintly of smoke from a few lanterns. "...And make sure everything's stowed tightly-" Zuko shook his head, and handed off a list to Teruko. "Why am I bothering you, you know your job."

"Always good to check, sir." Teruko smiled a little. "Right, General?"

"It is a fine balance, ensuring all of a command functions properly," Iroh agreed. "Ah. Sokka."

Not, *good morning*. No offer of tea. And Zuko barely glanced at him. The bad feeling stopped prickling down Sokka's spine, and broke into an all-out sprint. *Aw, man*. "You studied with Amaya, right?"

Zuko looked at him, cold as winter midnight. "Why? Does Katara want to call her a monster, too?"

Ouch. Somebody'd got up on the wrong side of the bedroll. Either that, or all the armor was contagious. "This isn't about Katara," Sokka started. Reconsidered, waving his hands. "I mean, it's about her, but she doesn't know I'm here, and - it's a waterbending question. And I don't know if you know, but Amaya had to be teaching you something about her bending, and- argh. It sounds crazy." He tried not to grab for his hair. "Can waterbenders mess with your head?"

Frowning, Zuko nodded.

That quick, Sokka felt his heart lodge somewhere near his ankles. "You're serious. Katara could... and we wouldn't even know, and..."

Zuko looked at him, then, and swore under his breath. "Here."

Surprised, Sokka downed half the cup of soup pushed into his hands without thinking. Spicy, but not nearly as hot as fire flakes, lucky for him. More just warm, rich with fish and seaweed and a kind of slippery noodles he'd never tasted before. "You eat fish?"

"Islands, Sokka." But if the tone was sarcastic, pale gold eyes were thoughtful. "You met me on a ship. *Yes*, we eat fish."

Fish and barbecue. *Why are we fighting again?* Sokka almost quipped. But finished the cup instead, gathering his thoughts. "You're serious. Katara can... Wait." He held up a hand. "Tell me what Amaya told you."

"She told me a lot," Zuko said frankly. "I'll sum up." He looked into memory, and nodded. "Water is family and community. Waterbenders can pull on that, just like the ocean. Most benders can't do much besides make you like them more. Or work with someone whose emotions are all screwed up, and help them get better. That's what healers are supposed to do. Keep an eye on people, especially in the winter; and if someone's acting off, stuff them full of oily fish and help them cheer up and calm down. Sometimes that's all it takes. Sometimes you have to drug them and let them sleep part of the dark away. And sometimes..." He winced. "That's why you've got ice floes."

"Oh." Suddenly, a lot of Gran-Gran's stories made a lot more sense. "So, if you've got a really strong bender, who didn't study healing...?" At Zuko's incredulous look, Sokka shrugged. "Come on, you know you've been showing her what to do."

"About *lightning*," Zuko said, still stunned. "I studied that on purpose. That - in the desert..."

"She had a few lessons with Yugoda," Sokka said plainly. All too aware of Iroh's attention focused on him. "Until Azula? It was enough."

...He'd heard Zuko growl like that before, one time before lots of Suki's village went up in flames. "*Combat-trained* waterbender," the firebender said flatly. "Of. Course. *Damn*. You spend all your time feuding with each other. You'd *need* something to keep your spears all pointed the same direction if someone else invades. And why bother training her to rein it in? Anyone who doesn't back the Avatar *is the enemy*." Fists clenched, flames flashing and vanishing. "Damn it, I should have *seen* it..."

Sokka ran that through in his head. And what Katara'd done. And what he'd done - and not done - trying to make sure they all came out okay. And kind of wished *he* could spit sparks. "I'm going to bounce Boomerang off Pakku's *head*. Damn it! He did that, and he didn't even warn us? We haven't had benders since Gran-Gran was young, nobody *knew* - what's *wrong* with you people? Earth, fire, water, air - you do things because you *can*, and the rest of us just have to live with it, and-"

"*Calm. Down.*"

Zuko. Hand on his shoulder. Looking about as sober and coldly mad as Sokka'd ever seen him. "The whole camp's mad," the firebender said bluntly. "Katara, Aang, us - I don't know. Don't get tangled in it. Think about your father, and breathe."

Dad. Sokka took a breath. Another. "What do you mean, you?"

"Strong firebenders can also affect the heart," Iroh spoke up. "It does not usually reach those outside our own nation. But you are a leader, and a chief's son. There is, perhaps, enough fire in you to be... susceptible."

Sokka swallowed. "I'm *Water Tribe*."

"Separation is an illusion," Zuko said simply. "Get deep enough, all the elements draw from the same source. All benders, Sokka. And everybody who *isn't* a bender. We all use chi. I can light air on fire. So? What do you think you're doing when that boomerang hits *exactly* where you want it? That's not just good aim. Bending *is* fighting. *Any* fighting trains your chi. So it's not as easy if you can't bend. Are you going to let that stop you?" He let go. "You want to know why all of us fight? Women included? Because we *don't know* who's going to grow up to be a firebender."

Sokka took a step back, disbelieving. "You're kidding. Even in her sling, Katara was-" He wagged his hands, remembering melting ice walls, and sharp *nos* from Mom and Dad.

"Water and earth are like that. Air Nomads - they were all born with it. But Fire Nation-" Zuko shook his head. "If your parents are both firebenders, most of the time you are too. But not all the time. We don't *know*. Not until someone's four or five. Or older."

They don't know? Sokka shook his head. *And why does Zuko sound like he's...* "How much older?"

Zuko let out a slow breath. "I was eight."

Sokka stared.

"So don't tell me I don't know what you're up against," Zuko said sharply. "I do. Agni, I do. Don't you *know* why Azula wants me charred to a crisp? *I took what was hers*. I'm firstborn, but she bent at *four*. Two years, Sokka. Two years she'd been training under our father's eye, and *everyone* knew she was a prodigy. He had what he *wanted*. The perfect heir to Sozin's legacy, to make up for his *disappointment*." He took a deep breath, and let it steam out. "You don't like benders twisting your heart? Learn to *fight back*."

Zuko wasn't always... Katara's been playing with water years longer... Sokka shook his head. "So you learned to fight with swords."

"That was one reason," Zuko said dryly. "You've met another. Pink, bouncy, giggles a lot?" He frowned. "Why didn't you? Dao aren't a Water Tribe style, but the Kyoshi Island waterbenders... what?"

"*What* Kyoshi Island waterbenders?" Sokka said carefully. If Aang and Katara could have learned there, instead of heading for the North Pole... *Yue*. "I didn't see any benders there. Just the Kyoshi Warriors and their fans... and they redirect your attacks..."

"Waterbending did inspire them, though they have rarely numbered benders among their company," Iroh agreed. "The eastern waterbenders were far better known in Avatar Kuruk's time, before Kyoshi Island was cut from the continent. They still persist there, but they live very quietly. Avatar Kyoshi had firm opinions on the separation of the four nations. Earth and water intermingling... irked her."

Sokka groaned. "And Aang made this big fuss about how he *was* Kyoshi..."

"They would not have been swift to draw his attention," Iroh nodded. "I am sorry you did not have the chance to linger. The Kyoshi Island sword-style is very beautiful. And effective."

And why that made Zuko smirk, Sokka wasn't sure he wanted to know. "They didn't use swords when you hit Suki's village." Kyoshi Island... damn it, they were heading for the Fire Nation. The wrong way.

"You forget, they were neutral almost a hundred years," Iroh said mildly. "Fire Nation visitors were not welcome, but so long as they passed as peaceful Earth Kingdom travelers, it was possible to walk unhindered."

Sokka paused. Took another look at Zuko's singed green robes. "You did this before. Not just in Ba Sing Se. Or dressing up to yank Aang out from under Zhao's nose. You... sneak."

"Sometimes," Zuko admitted stiffly.

Sokka raised a curious eyebrow. "Okay, it *worked*, so I'm missing something?"

"To disguise oneself is an act of Low War, and implies you are not strong enough to face your enemies directly," Iroh stated. "For a great name, that is not exactly proper." He heaved a dramatic sigh. "I am such a trial to my family."

Zuko reddened.

"But as it happens, I did not say I had seen that sword on *Kyoshi* Island," Iroh said plainly. "Though it was an island. With the most beautiful waterfalls..."

Zuko, Sokka suddenly noticed, was looking any direction but theirs.

Iroh winked at Sokka, hand up to shield a loud whisper. "He didn't *always* know how to swim."

"*Not* going to solve his problem." Zuko glared at them both. "I don't know what you and Chief Hakoda want to do about Katara. I know what I'd like to do. But I don't have a good history with sisters."

Sokka remembered lightning, and grimaced. "Sometimes she listens to Aang..."

"Then you're at the wrong end of camp," Zuko said dryly. "Good luck."

Sokka eyed him. "You could talk to Aang."

"I don't think so."

He'd heard anger in Zuko's voice, lots of times. He'd never heard venom. And... nope, not his imagination, it was getting hot in here. "You said attacking our village like that wasn't your brightest day ever," Sokka pointed out. "He's a kid. He thought you were the bad guy. Come on, give him another chance-"

"*No.*"

Fire, blooming from bone-white knuckles. Zuko made himself breathe, loosening fists finger by finger. "I am Zuko. Son of Ursa, and Fire Lord Ozai. My honor reflects on my clan, on every soldier I have ever commanded, on every soldier I *will* ever command. And Aang..." He snorted. "I don't know why I'm even *surprised*. Air blows where it wants, when it wants. Words are just your voice on the wind. And they own the wind." A bitter laugh. "Agni, what was Kuzon thinking?"

"Nephew." Iroh rested a hand on Zuko's shoulder. "I am certain things were different then."

"I'm not," Zuko said quietly. "Kuzon was fifteen. The Fire Nation had had half a century of peace

and prosperity. Who'd care about a few little lies from a foreign child?" He looked at Sokka, gold eyes grim. "I'm not Kuzon. I'm *not* a minor clan member who wouldn't have been near becoming the heir if half a dozen other people hadn't ended up dead. Thanks to Sozin, by the way." A determined breath. "He offered parole, Sokka. *He* set the terms. Not me. And then he *broke* them." He waved toward his robes, where armor would have sported an ornamented collar. "Gold means a great name or a ranking officer. Someone with power to speak for the Fire Nation. Someone whose honor *is* our country's. And damn it, *Aang knows that!*"

About to protest, Sokka paused. Thought that over. "You're saying Aang slapped the whole Fire Nation in the face." Not that he *objected* to that, really. But man, couldn't Aang have just thought a *little* bit before waving that grin under Zuko's nose?

"It is a bit more severe than that," Iroh said heavily. "To us, honor is not simple glory earned in battle. It is *life*. Without honor, there is no trust. No one will help you, or stand by your side. And without that, when knives gleam..." He sighed. "It is as if you returned to your sled from hunting on the tundra, to find every arctic dog slain."

Dead, Sokka realized, all too able to picture it. Maybe you could hold out a few days, maybe you would get lucky and someone would come looking for you, but if no one did...

Sokka gulped, working it through. *Iroh didn't just stick with Zuko to be nice. If Zuko lost his honor, then the Fire Nation can treat him the way they treat everybody they don't like, and that means-*

Well. Maybe he wasn't sure of all it meant, not to the Fire Nation. But one thing was crystal clear. His honor was the absolute, no-holds-barred, sorest spot Zuko had - and Aang had just stomped it. *Hard*.

You know, if it was Zhao, this would be a good thing.

Zhao was dead. Zuko wasn't. Given the Ocean Spirit had apparently grabbed for both of them, that kind of clued Sokka in on which firebender was the bigger problem.

"Katara wants us dead, and Aang wants us dishonored," Zuko snarled. "No. I will not *give him another chance*. My people deserve better." He jerked a nod toward the doorway. "Good luck with Katara. And don't let Aang get Toph killed. *I will find you.*"

That... sounded final. And given the quiet in-and-out of Teruko and her people all the time they'd been talking, with even lanterns now being blown out and stored away... "You're leaving?" Sokka blurted out. *You're after Aang. Why would you leave?* "You can't leave! You promised Toph."

"To *help heal Aang*," Zuko said bluntly. "I did. Every minute we're here is another Katara has to set your people off. Have you ever seen a mob? I have. There's too many of you. We won't be able to use nonlethal force. You'll die."

Sokka's eyes narrowed. "Just keep pushing it, *Sparky*."

A corner of Zuko's lips turned up; a cold, cold smirk. "You seem to be under the impression that the truce is meant to protect *us* from *you*."

Oh, no, Sokka thought, lifting an accusing finger. *I don't care how lousy you say you are at being diplomatic, you do not get away with that one-*

Iroh was smiling at him. In a way that raised all the hairs on Sokka's neck.

Finger still hovering, Sokka mentally counted allies and enemies. On his side, the Water Tribe

fleet, the greatest earthbender in the world, Katara, and Aang. On Zuko's-

Toph thinks Iroh's good enough to take her. It's daylight, which means Zuko probably can beat Katara. And Aang's hurt.

And four-to-one ship odds didn't mean a handful of snow in a fire when all *Suzuran* had to do was crank up the trebuchets and drench wooden ships in flames.

We've got Zuko. Oh yeah. Right where he wants us. Oh, man... Sokka swallowed dryly. "You promised Toph."

"And I kept it," Zuko said levelly. "I respect Chief Hakoda. I don't want to kill any more of his people."

Erk. "Toph swears you're one of the good guys," Sokka got out.

"She likes the Avatar, too." Zuko didn't turn a hair. "Toph is a Bei Fong. Daughter of a great merchant clan. They are responsible for their workers and traders. Like a great name is to his people. She won't like it. She *won't* be surprised."

He must have made some noise of protest; Zuko's eyes narrowed. "Did you listen to what she told you, before all of you ran into Azula?" the firebender said levelly. "Her parents hired *bounty hunters* to bring her home *against her will*. And that's one of the gentler things the Bei Fongs have done to defend their name. You think Toph doesn't understand ruthlessness?"

He's bluffing, Sokka thought. *He might be that cold. He's Fire Nation. We know them. But Toph's not... well, she just isn't.*

He was sure of it. Almost.

Think, Sokka told himself. *Aang needs more help. So how can I get Zuko to-* "You owe Avatar Yangchen a knot."

"No," Zuko said calmly. "I don't."

Not working. And why was it not working? In the desert Katara had helped Iroh, and he'd *said* he owed them. That had to still hold, right? Why else would he have jumped at the chance when Toph needed one firebender-sized ally to mow down Dai Li? Not to mention really *healing* Aang, instead of just making sure he didn't die... *Never mind. Think!* "You're going to leave Toph. You're going to leave Aang, hurt. And you're going to leave my father, who you say you respect, without even trying?"

Zuko took one deliberate step forward, close enough Sokka could feel the heat shimmering off him. "It's dangerous."

"I noticed," Sokka stated, trying to match that edged calm. "You don't want to kill people? I don't want anybody getting killed. Do this, even Katara won't say you didn't give it a shot. Which makes you guys leaving a lot more likely to stay calm. Right?"

Zuko eyed him, and turned toward Iroh. Who shrugged slightly: *it's your choice*.

Nodding, Zuko glanced at Teruko. "Finish up here, and get everyone on board. Try not to let Asahi bite you."

"Under control, sir." But she cast him the slightest look askance.

Zuko shrugged. "Uncle and I will take a look."

"Um," Sokka started. Because maybe he wasn't sure what he was planning yet, but with Zuko and Iroh both in the same place? It wouldn't be easy.

"If you think I'm going anywhere near Katara alone, when I'm this mad? You're crazier than the airbender," Zuko said coldly.

Couldn't argue with that. Damn.

This is a bad idea.

Iroh sitting behind him, Zuko waited in Aang's tent for Toph to get there, cursing himself for falling for Sokka's offer. Katara hated them all individually and as a nation; he could see it in her eyes, as she sat on the bed by a wary airbender. Lounging over by a fabric wall, face a little too bland, Sokka could see it too. Why else was he stropping the edge of that boomerang so casually? So how, exactly, was trying again on that damn chakra-knot going to change anything, except to make Katara more convinced they all had to die?

It won't, Zuko told himself. But it still matters. To Sokka. To Chief Hakoda. No matter how hard she pushes, her father is an honorable man. And we don't want a fight.

And why that didn't matter to her, Zuko wished he knew. She'd helped them in the desert. Why act as an honorable opponent then, and an implacable foe now?

She's never seen Uncle armed.

Zuko blinked, caught off-guard by Lee's shy whisper. Dug deep within, wondering why he hadn't noticed an odd *silence* these past few days. Sure, Katara had only seen Iroh bend at Zhao's soldiers once, before Ba Sing Se. And then only on the Moon's side, which meant *her* side. And Uncle was *good* at looking harmless. But he was still a firebender. He wasn't exactly a helpless elder...

Loathing. Disgust. Crawl away and die.

A breath, and he wrapped fire to shield that second self. *Uncle. Amaya. Jinhai. Your people.*

Hatred loosened its grip. But he could still *feel* it.

Katara. She hates me. And Lee's Water Tribe, I feel her pulling at me...

No wonder he'd shoved Lee back into hiding. Just a taste of that, when he was lost in fever... it'd be so, so easy to let her kill him. And he wanted to *live*.

Not that you're doing such a good job of that right now, sparking fire without even a warning-

There was no heat.

Holding his expression steady, Zuko glanced at his hands. He could feel the chi moving. Why couldn't he feel fire?

No flames. Just a shimmer out of the corner of his eye, that vanished if he tried to look at it.

Not fire. No way it's water. But I'm bending something- Oh.

Spirit. Amaya bent spirit, not just water, to hide people from the Dai Li. To shield a mind, no matter what tried to warp it.

"Ah. Like the plague kamuiy," Uncle murmured behind him. "You believe this injury is to the spirit, as well as the body?"

Which did and didn't make sense; getting blasted by Azula might wound anyone's spirit, sure, but...

Uncle can see spirits. Even when the rest of us can't.

A fact Amaya had dropped so casually, a day or so after the haima-jiao, he knew it had to be important. But there hadn't been a chance to ask, before everything with the Avatar blew up in his face.

"Fire fights water," Zuko murmured back; feeling it burn to hold the worst of Katara's hate at bay, and promising himself he and Uncle would have a *long* talk, later. Right now, he had an angry waterbender just waiting for him to make one wrong move on Aang. He needed to know what Lee knew, and didn't *know* he knew.

She thought Azula attacked a harmless elder, not a warrior for our tribe. Uncle said the Fire Nation needs the Moon too, but you know how Katara hears what she wants to hear. If he fought for the Moon, he was fighting for the Water Tribes. End of story. And in the desert, when Uncle went down...

He'd screamed. He remembered that. And dove into healing with everything he had - and Katara had *never* seen him rescue Uncle before, she would have had *no idea* that clan bound you as tightly as any Water Tribe family...

Youngsters help the elders, so their wisdom helps the tribe survive. I was doing what was right for a Water Tribe child. And Uncle was hurt trying to help Katara... just like an elder helping a girl of the tribe. So she wanted to help us. Then.

But in Ba Sing Se, he helped me drag her off. And then he lashed her up one side and down the other. Zuko hadn't heard the argument, but he didn't have to know the specifics. Uncle was proud of him. He'd never have let Katara's venom stand. That makes him an enemy - and once she saw him bend his way into Azula's mess to get me, he was an enemy warrior. Just like me.

Wonderful. They'd been thinking of Katara as an honorable opponent, because that was what an honorable *Fire Nation* healer would have done. Iroh had been injured facing a mutual enemy. He deserved an offer of aid.

But she didn't do it for our reasons. She did it for hers.

Maybe Toph could raise a sandstone wall in here, so he could beat his head against it. It'd feel *so good* when he stopped.

And here she was, black hair a wild nightmare as the earthbender rubbed sleep out of her eyes. "So, this time I get to feel your trick?"

"Just the beginning," Zuko warned. "The last time I touched that mess, you know what happened. I'll show you how it starts. Then you *get clear*."

Toph grinned, undaunted. "Got it."

"Um... before we do this," Aang spoke up, "I just wanted to say I'm really, really sorry about last

night-

"No you're not," Zuko stated, level as drawn steel. *Uncle was here, you idiot. Do you think he wouldn't tell me what you said? All of it?*

"But I am!" the airbender protested. "I know honor's important to the Fire Nation, I was just trying to-

"Protect the Water Tribe?" Zuko let his brow arch slightly. "You're not sorry you did it. You're sorry it had *consequences*. Surprise, surprise." He drew a breath, gripping control with both hands. "In case Chief Hakoda doesn't know he has to tell you, let me inform you what some of those consequences would have been. If it'd been *anyone* but me." Another breath. "You gave your parole. You broke it. Meaning my half of the agreement was null and void. Any other commander - *any* other Fire Nation officer - would have been forced to do what the honor of their word required." One heartbeat. Two. "Meaning they could have sailed back to the Water Tribe and *slaughtered* every. Last. One of them."

Horried silence. Sokka was leaning forward a little, eyes no longer sleepy. And Katara had her body between him and the airbender, hand near her waterskin. "You said we'd be safe!" she flung at him.

"No," Zuko said evenly. "*He* said you wouldn't be hurt." Two breaths, and a smirk. "He never said for how long."

Aang was pale as milk, eyes round.

"Doesn't feel so good from this side, does it?" Zuko said quietly. "I don't care if you're the Avatar. The Southern Air Temple's prodigy. The *last of your kind*. You're still human, just like the rest of us. Actions have *consequences*. If Kuzon and Monk Gyatso couldn't teach you that, you'd damn well better learn it now. *You lied to me*. Why you did it doesn't matter. The first matter of honor between us was a lie. *Your* lie. I can trust *nothing* you've said since then." *Breathe. Stay calm*. "So grow up, show a little dignity, and *stop lying to my face*."

"Or, as we say in the army," Iroh mused behind him, "if you find yourself in a hole? Stop digging."

"But - Toph could tell you I'm really-

"Twinkletoes." Toph pushed her hair back, mostly confining it under a band. "You're missing the point, big time. You're a *contract breaker*. You found a loophole and squirmed right through it. If you did that to my parents? You'd be blacklisted *forever*. Nobody'd trade with you. Nobody'd deal with you. That's a really, really big slice of the Earth Kingdom to have mad at you." She cracked her knuckles. "So are we going to do this?"

"What is wrong with you?" Katara demanded. "He says horrible things about Aang, and you *agree* with him? And then you think he's going to *help*?"

Sokka buried his face in his hands.

"Forget it, Toph," Zuko advised. "You're not going to get anywhere. I'm not part of her tribe. I can't be trusted." He looked at Katara, cold and angry. "So lying to outsiders doesn't matter." He eyed Aang. "In case *you're* wondering why I'm here, it has nothing to do with *you*. I told Sokka I'd take a look at you. To see if there's anything safe that can be done about that knot in your chakra. I doubt it. Some things just need time. But I said I would look. *I keep my word*." His voice dropped, and Zuko couldn't keep a trace of venom from leaking into it. "I will *always* keep my word."

"And here's where we hit what *really* ticks me off, Katara," Toph said bluntly. "You think Aang was right to lie to a bad guy, and do whatever it took to get away from the Fire Nation? Fine. He was." She pointed at Aang. "But if you thought Zuko was such a bad guy you had to lie to him, what the heck made you think he'd keep *his* word?"

"Well, he-" Aang swallowed, and shut up.

Sokka winced. "Let me guess. He was wearing gold, so you knew he could make a promise like that. And keep it."

"How'd you - I mean, a lot of things changed in a hundred years-"

"Stop. Just... stop." Sokka sounded tired. "When we get some breathing space, Dad and I are going to tell you what Kyoshi did. And why the Fire Nation's got a *right* not to trust any Avatar without a good reason." He shook his head. "But this isn't about being the Avatar. This is about you. You knew the rules. You knew Zuko would play fair. And you knew you wouldn't."

"Sokka!" Katara hissed.

"Don't *Sokka* me, Sis-"

"Stop it!" Aang's hands hovered near his ears, and his eyes were moist. "Why is everybody so angry? I said I was sorry!"

"Sorry won't fix this," Zuko said levelly. Aware, as he locked gazes with Katara, exactly where most of that simmering rage was coming from.

"You're right." Blue eyes were cold as winter. "Some things, no one can *ever* be sorry enough for."

I didn't kill your mother, damn it! But Zuko couldn't say it. If he said it, he'd scream it. And everything would go down in flames. He could feel it. "Let's get this over with."

Katara grudgingly backed off a few inches. Toph clapped her hands and dashed in, fingers resting on his right arm to feel as Zuko pushed the firepot's flames to golden-green. "Turn," he ordered.

Eyes still wide, Aang froze.

"I am not going to hurt you!" Zuko growled. "Not here. Not now. In this tent, I'm your healer. Idiot. You believed me when you'd known me for all of a few minutes attacking you, and you don't now? Agni. I promised Sokka." He snorted. "And if you don't believe that, look where we are. You think I'm stupid enough to tick off Toph when we're on *sand*?"

Aang looked dubious. "You went after Katara on an ice plain in a blizzard."

"There's a difference between stupid and desperate," Zuko said grimly. "Learn it. Turn, damn it. I can't hold this forever."

Reluctantly, Aang turned.

Finally. Zuko traced his way through dull gold and glints of brass, careful to stay clear of the lightning-scar. He wasn't sure what Toph thought she'd get out of this, there wasn't a speck of earth in Aang unless you counted bones - but she'd asked.

Don't worry about it. Just heal.

A little time, and Zuko pulled back. "Okay. Time for you to make a strategic withdrawal."

"You said you're just going to look," Toph objected.

"And last time I thought I was just going to heal," Zuko stated. "Go."

Sticking her tongue out at him, Toph moved.

Okay. Edges. Just look at the edges. From a distance.

He hadn't mentioned it to Katara before, because she hadn't mentioned it. And he damn well wasn't going to mention it now, not when he knew how much Katara *didn't* know about healing. But working near Aang's chakras was *terrifying*.

So much energy. I'm not trained for this...

Studying that slowly-writhing knot of brassy gray, Zuko felt like a moth-owl trying to sneak around a bonfire. This was power that could tear mountains down. The power that had split Kyoshi Island from the mainland, searing a swath of ocean to lifeless rock; that had drowned half the Fire Nation, and shattered Sozin's first invasion of the Earth Kingdom like an ice cube dropped into boiling water.

This is what I tried to catch. Agni, I'm an idiot.

No wonder Azula had gone straight for the kill. Why not? With the Avatar dead, they could have divided what remained of the fleets and used the comet to obliterate both poles.

Except those aren't the only Water Tribes. I wonder if the Fire Lord knows-

The knot writhed again. He wasn't fast enough.

Lava freezing searing-

Indownupout away from the bystanders!

Lightning crashed, and someone screamed.

Ears ringing, Zuko coughed, and did a headcount. Aang, woozy but sitting upright, blinking like he'd stared into sparklers. Uncle, Toph, Sokka - scattered and dazed, but intact. Katara, bolting out the hole in blue fabric, so probably not her-

"You *bastard!*"

Oh yes, Zuko thought, red hazing his vision, *that's definitely her*.

Uncle caught him before he could move. Thank the spirits. "Your parents' honor is unsullied," he said sternly. "She knows nothing. You are wiser than that."

Wordless, Zuko nodded. *Thank you, Uncle.*

"What the heck?" Sokka sputtered.

"Told you," Zuko managed. "Tangled chi. Bad." *And I'm not making sense. Terrific.* "Kept it clear of us. Didn't know someone would be outside..." He swallowed, dreading what might be out there.

My responsibility. I have to know.

He wasn't the first out of the tent. But he wasn't last. "You," Katara hissed, hands wrapped in water

as she worked over a coughing Bato.

Alive, Zuko realized in a rush of relief, barely registering Hakoda's worried scowl, the gathering crowd of blue and spears. *Thank Agni*. "I told you it was dangerous."

"It was supposed to be dangerous to *you*!" she snarled back.

Waterbender. Strangle. Now.

Iroh caught him again. "I believe we are finished here," he said gravely.

"Oh, you're finished, all right!" Hands no longer glowing, Katara rose, water twisting around one arm. "Just like your sister. Throw around lightning, and never mind who it hurts. And why should we expect anything else? You're Fire Lord Ozai's son!"

Like that's my fault? Zuko almost snarled. "It was an *accident*!"

"You lie about Aang, you lie about the Fire Nation, you lie about the Avatars - everything you do tears us apart!" Blue eyes narrowed. "I bet your father's *so proud*!"

"Katara," Aang tried.

"No! Don't you see what just happened? What *could* have happened? I let him touch you! He almost killed Bato! And either he did it on *purpose*, and he's been lying to us all along - or he lied about healing you! Because he *doesn't* know what he's doing, and his teacher's a lousy, cowardly excuse for a healer who thought she could teach a *firebender*!"

Any other day, any other time, the way she'd said *firebender* would have sent Zuko into a molten rage. But today...

Amaya.

You do not insult my teacher, little girl. Not now. Not ever.

Fire and ice. Not warring inside him, but *twisting*, fury and hate each warding the other until he felt almost... calm.

Eye of the storm.

Firebending's opening moves were obvious. Waterbending... was simply finding a quiet balance, and waiting. And he *could* wait, Zuko realized, darkly amused. Because Katara was watching *him* for an explosion, and not-

"You are a young and ignorant fool," Iroh said grimly, heat rolling off him like a bonfire. "Healer Amaya is a brave and generous lady, who has healed more wounds of the war than you will in a lifetime. She has true kindness, and virtue. Not to do what is easy, and aid those whom all will praise her for, but to do what is hard! To wade into the flood of war, and rescue, knowing she will gain *nothing* from it! No great victories in the war. No rebellions to chant her name to the skies. Only the knowledge that she has *tried*... and for that, someone may live!"

"You love her." Katara whispered it, pale as fine maple-pine. Flushed then, dark as iron-cedar.

"You *touched* her! How could you? How could *she*? You're a firebender, you're a murderer - and *she let you touch her*!"

Damning enough; Zuko could hear that in the gasps of disgust, the snarls of rage. The words alone

could have sparked a mob, without the lethal tide of *hate, hate them, hate them all...*

And he *knew* this hate. Oh Agni, he knew it to his bones.

She's gone. She's gone because of me, it's my fault, Mommy, Mommy-!

"Enough!"

Zuko swirled flame in a ball and threw; and never mind that he'd never used this form in combat before. Not with fire. He knew the differences between the elements, now; knew how to soften moves of fire, or sharpen water, to switch-

Katara yelped as the fire-net pinned her, blazing force binding arms and legs tight. *Hate* cut off like a knife, leaving the silence bleeding.

You're not bending your way out of this one.

"It's all about you, isn't it?" Zuko hissed. Ignoring reactions of shock and fear and threatened violence; all that mattered was the waterbender, and the flames that *were not* burning her. Yet. "Forget the Avatar. Forget your tribe. This is all you, and your pain. You lost your mother. And it ripped a hole in you so wide and deep and dark... you're hanging on by your fingernails, and what's down there is so awful, so much *hate*, that it can't *ever* be you. So it's somebody else's fault. It's somebody else's *monster*. And you hate it. It's not fair. It's not you. And you'll make the whole world pay for putting that monster inside you. You'll make it all bleed. Make it all *burn*."

Katara drew a breath, face full of angry denial. Zuko yanked on flame, crushing air from her in a squeak.

"You burn inside," Zuko went on, still wracked by that same cold fury. "Sometimes you can't eat. Sometimes you can't *sleep*. Because the nightmares are waiting behind your eyes... and the only way you can get rid of them is to give them to someone else. To make us feel your pain. To get your *revenge*." He smirked, cold and bitter. "Well, guess what, Katara? You're going to get it."

Blue eyes widened. She gulped in a startled breath.

"See, you did *exactly* what you said you would," Zuko went on, voice like knives of ice. "You stopped me from catching Aang. From restoring my honor. I've failed. I've run out of time. And now... now *Azula* will be confirmed as the Fire Lord's heir. Crown princess. All she ever wanted. And when my father dies - oh, and who knows? She might *help* him - the Fire Sages will crown her as Fire Lord. They won't have a choice." He breathed, holding onto his temper like a kite in a gale. "But the great names... Some of them will see her for what she is. They won't be able to give her their loyalty. They *care* about their people. And it will destroy them. Azula *will* have the power in the Fire Nation, if she has to kill half of us to do it. She won't accept anything less." Another breath. Odd; he would have sworn he'd be shaking right now. "My people will die. They'll die by the thousands. Streets will run red with blood. And then, *then*, you'll come for us. The Water Tribes, and the Earth Kingdom. After all, we deserve it. We killed the Air Nomads. We've savaged the other nations. We murdered your *mother*."

I will not cry. I will not scream.

"We'll die," Zuko said, soft and bitter as air of a winter dawn. "We'll die hard, but we'll die. And the bodies will rot in the streets, with no one to give them a pyre; and the rivers will rage red, until all you bend is crimson and copper nightmares." He shook his head, slowly. "And you won't even have to lift a finger, Katara. All you have to do... is wait." He let fire flicker away, pinning her in

his gaze. "You'll have your revenge. All the revenge in the world. And I hope you *choke* on it."

The world faded back in. Zuko could see Uncle's wary watchfulness, Aang shaking between Toph and Sokka, Hakoda's look of dawning horror...

Not me. He's not looking at me.

Watching his daughter, Hakoda shook his head in slow denial.

Oh. He didn't know. Zuko smiled bitterly. *Welcome to my world.*

But he wasn't done here. Not after what Katara had said. Not with his people still on shore; expecting trouble, sure, but not ready for things to go *this* fast to Koh's lair in a handbasket.

Zuko drew himself up, court manners settling around him like armor. "Chief Hakoda," he said formally. "As your daughter insists I act in my father's name, so I must accept she acts in yours. She declares the truce between us ended. I know what the exigencies of war would demand you do to my people. But we came under truce, and meant no harm. I ask leave for us to depart as we came, in peace."

"And if we don't?" Hakoda said neutrally.

Zuko smirked, feeling fire lick at its human confines, raging to protect... and kill. And the bay was so close, and it *pulled*... "Then I burn your ships to the waterline, and I don't stop until my men are safe. Or you're all dead." He didn't even glance at Katara. "Your daughter thinks I'm Sozin reborn. I'd hate to *disappoint* her."

"Don't do this," Aang blurted out. "You're not like this. You *rescue* people. You can't do this!"

Not. Helping. "You never listen, do you?" Zuko said quietly. Not even glancing that way. "My people are going to die. *My people.* You have no idea what I. *Can't. Do.*" Gold held wary blue. *Waiting.*

"Go," Hakoda said at last. "Just get out of here."

Zuko bowed, one great name to another. Turned, and marched, Uncle guarding his left.

Please let this not be stupid, I don't want to kill anyone, please...

But he would. Oh, Agni, he would. His men were in the middle of spear-armed death, and he'd do what he had to, to get them out. *Whatever* it cost.

"Sir!" Teruko's voice, parade-ground strong. "We have to go. *Now!*"

Oh Agni, now what-?

Signals from *Suzuran* told it all. *Earthbenders sighted, strength-*

"*Chikusho!*" Iroh swore.

"Right," Zuko sighed. Wanting to scream. But what was the point? What else did he *expect*, he'd just stripped hide off *Katara*, and the Avatar adored her like a lion-puppy. And spirits *helped* the Avatar. Always.

They ran for it.

You wouldn't think a man Iroh's age could move that fast, Hakoda thought wryly, barely glancing at the firebenders as they bolted down the beach. Rationally, the chief knew he should be watching their enemies depart. Should be wondering what had set that unsettling fire-woman Teruko off; not with anger, but a controlled fear for her charges that had the little steamer's engines already up and running, nosing away from shore. Should, at the very least, be eyeing his men to ensure they kept the last remnants of the truce, as their oddly honorable foes bolted.

But he'd been a chief too often these past two years, and a father not nearly enough. And it was a father Katara needed right now, standing in the circle of their warriors with her face pale, blue eyes wide as she shook her head *no*-

Standing in the midst of warriors who'd felt what *he'd* felt. An unthinking, utter disgust for the firebenders - then a shock like hot water on snow, as Zuko's flame seized her. Leaving fury floundering in a sea of, *what was I* doing?

Which had kept his men back almost as much as Iroh's narrowed eyes, and his own hiss about holding steady. They'd fought firebenders; they all knew so long as a firebender was directly connected to their flame, *they* controlled whether it burned. Or didn't. Distract Zuko, and that fire might slip - and Hakoda could only imagine the agony left behind.

A good reason to hold off, so long as Zuko bit with words and not fire. But not the only one. Because they were under *truce*, damn it all. And you did not break a truce until an enemy offered one of your tribe harm. Whether or not Iroh's attentions to a waterbender turned their stomachs, Healer Amaya was Northern Water Tribe. Not Southern. His men *knew* that.

Which meant if he didn't remind his men he was a father right now, he might not *have* a daughter.

Deliberately, Hakoda put a hand on Katara's shoulder. Felt her trembling, cold. "Is that what you want?" he asked soberly. "For years, you told me you believed in the Avatar. That he would return, and restore balance to the world. Is that the balance you dreamed of? A world without a Fire Nation? No people of the sun. No warmth. No summer." He lifted his hand to touch a tearstained cheek. "You were always our joy. Proof that even the Fire Nation could not conquer our spirits. Even after Kya... I didn't know. I should have stayed. I should have been there for both of you." He gathered Sokka in with his eyes. "You are our tribe's future. No victory against the Fire Nation is worth anything, if it costs us who we are."

Aang blinked, looking straight at him, with an awed amazement that made Hakoda want to arch a wry brow. *What, wisdom only comes from temples? You can find it behind a spear-point as well, if you survive. You have a lot to learn.*

Toph frowned. Shoved Aang into Sokka's arms, lifted her hands as if pushing an unseen weight-

Shoved down, and up again. The firebenders' shelter dissolved as if it had never been, and sand hardened into a chest-high wall in front of them. "Heads up!"

What? Why? Hakoda wondered. The Fire Nation was retreating, why was Toph-

Sand rumbled open under the fleeing pair, and Hakoda felt his heart drop with it.

A blast of flames, and Iroh was clear, just as the beach slammed shut like icebergs clashing together.

Iroh was clear, Hakoda realized grimly, seeing green uniforms pour through what was left of the

camp. Hearing an unearthly howl rise from Teruko's marines, their steamer churning back toward shore even though they knew - they *had* to know! - a shore under earthbenders' commands was nothing but a deathtrap.

They knew. Hakoda could see it. But they didn't care... and he could see the reason why, in the grief and fury etched on Iroh's face.

"Zuko!"

I failed.

Dark. Crushing him, until all he could hear was his own heartbeat drumming in his ears. Crushing away breath, and without breath there *was* no fire.

Failed. Couldn't find him in time. Couldn't make him see. Couldn't save my people.

Wonder if dying hurts as much the second time...

No. I promised. You were naïve and selfish and a kid, Aang, but you didn't deserve what the elders saddled you with. The whole world didn't deserve what was going to happen.

I burned my luck and life away, and I promised myself it wouldn't matter. I wouldn't let it. I'd find a way without luck, somehow I'd find a way to fix things...

The darkness was *damp*.

...I don't need luck.

Breath gone, he crooked his fingers.

Come to me, murderers. Iroh dodged rocks and shifting sands by inches, raising just enough fire to mimic a long-retired veteran. Not toothless... but not nearly dangerous enough for the officer in command to hang warily back. *Come to me and die.*

Rationally, he knew he should retreat. Sand favored the oncoming army, Teruko's marines were putting themselves at risk to fetch him, and Toph might yet win Zuko free with just a little more time-

If he is still alive.

And that was why he could not withdraw. Lu Ten had died so, crushed and swallowed by the very earth of Ba Sing Se, and he would *not* be moved from where he had lost a second son-

Sand surged up like a waterspout, steaming from a fiery roar.

Alive.

He seized one clawed, furious hand, yanking up as Zuko shoved smoking sand down and away. His nephew blinked away grit, gold only a thin, bright rim around wells of deep black-

For one heartbeat, Iroh stared into the full fury of the line of Sozin. And smirked.

Wheeled, and fell into the kata he knew Zuko would use. The only one that made sense, with enemies thick before them and allies at risk behind.

A firebender's offense is his defense.

The mass fireball struck ahead of the Earth Kingdom troops, not on them; blasting them back. Not that Iroh imagined their opponents appreciated such restraint... as Zuko's next swirl, hands sweeping up and forward, sent boiling sand flooding over armored troops like a molten tsunami.

Closing his ears to the screams, Iroh seized a green sleeve, and pulled.

Thank Agni, Zuko ran with him.

Sand and surf under his sandals, and armored hands pulled them up over the side, as fireblasts warned off those few earthbenders brave or stupid enough to advance past searing sand. All the while Zuko was growling under his breath; a low, rumbling snarl that put up hairs on Iroh's neck, and left every marine but Teruko drawing back a prudent step.

Faceplate shielding her expression, Iroh could only read the set of Teruko's shoulders. But those were eloquent enough: *Ah, damn it.* "Get us *off* this frosted beach!" she yelled.

Engines surged, and water rushed between them and oncoming thrusts of stone. Keeping his balance with a practiced sway, Iroh kept a wary eye on his nephew as everyone's coordinated fire blasted stony missiles from the sky. "Acting without orders, Lieutenant?" he ribbed her gently.

"Sir! Standing orders were to withdraw with minimum casualties on both sides." Two punches of flame, and a sweeping leg, as someone on shore got cute and skipped a stone across the water. "If the prince were able to give orders, I'm sure he wouldn't countermand that."

"Able to?" Iroh said sharply. For Zuko was fighting as well and cleverly as he ever had against the Avatar, reacting fast as a mosquito-hawk.

"Sir! Dragons need to *think* to talk." Teruko ducked fragments of stone. "Right now, we're just blue-nosed monkey noise!"

Oh. Later, Iroh was sure, he would curse himself for being an old fool, believing in spirits whose balance he could not see, and missing the fiery youngster right under his nose. *Later.*

For now *Suzuran's* trebuchets were pounding the beach with fireballs, adding chaos, fire, and destruction to earthbending already hampered by the stretch of water between them. Only a little longer, and they should be away...

Steel screeched on stone, and the world crashed.

In ringing silence of still engines, Iroh swore he could hear a tether snap.

"Better disciplined than I thought," the old general grumbled, regaining his feet in a tangle of marines. The steamer was canted and listing; not sinking, not yet, but he had no illusions about their chances. Beside him he saw Zuko had been able to keep his balance, cat-owl quick, staring at shore with a hungry, furious gaze.

A surly squawk, an inquisitive chirrup, and black feathers ruffled out of the hold. Asahi's talons bore her up steel rungs steadily, if gracelessly as a turtle-duck climbing silk draperies.

Which Iroh had actually seen, more than once. As a child Zuko had been very... enthusiastic about

animals. If it could be stalked and pounced on, it ended up in Ursa's forgiving lap.

Well. At least now he knew why Ursa's admonitions had ranged less along the lines of *don't do that*, and more in favor of *never kill it unless you plan to eat it*.

Chirping distress, Asahi lowered her head to rub on Zuko's shoulder. The young man blinked, and shook his head, mouth a grim line as he heard the curses and stifled whimpers that spoke of bones badly broken.

Back with us. Good. "Nephew, the crew," Iroh requested. "Lieutenant, a spyglass-"

She slapped it into his hand almost before he had the word out. "Sorry, Sir. I don't know the insignia."

With a touch of the self-condemnation he'd heard in his nephew's voice so often, though no reasonable officer would expect a *marine* to know all the standards of the Earth Army. "We shall have to expand *Suzuran's* library," Iroh said firmly, searching through clouds of dust and smoke on shore. Where was it, any commander bold enough to attack firebenders in the early morning would not fail to display it-

Ah. Oh dear. "General Gang," Iroh said levelly. "Get everyone above deck. Now."

"*Everyone topside! Prepare to abandon!*" Teruko bellowed. "Sir?" she asked, not even close to a whisper.

"I fear my reputation has preceded me," Iroh said dryly. "He will not be taking honorable prisoners." He met the marine's gaze. "I would suggest you *not* be taken, Lieutenant."

"I will do as honor bids me, sir."

Meaning she meant to stay alive so long as she must, to try and see them safe. No matter the cost. Iroh inclined his head, feeling steel shudder into his bones as the first rocks punched through the hull. "Prince Zuko-"

Crouching beside the hatch as the engineer scrambled out, Zuko lifted gentle hands, then breathed subtle frost.

The crackle of forming ice made every firebender shiver.

"Gave us a double hull," Zuko said grimly. "They're punching rocks just through us, and pulling back. Why waste chi crushing us when they can let the sea do the dirty work?" He looked over the crew. "It buys us some time. But he's going to notice we're not sinking."

"Time's all we need," Teruko said gleefully, as *Suzuran's* shadow fell over them. "Move it, people!"

I am a bit old for climbing boarding ladders, Iroh thought ruefully, as three sets of chain and metal rungs rang down to them. But grabbed hold regardless, and started climbing, just as Zuko and another marine swarmed up the other two ladders. There was no time to argue precedence with Teruko, and no sense if there had been; firebenders of their strength would be far more effective from *Suzuran's* deck than trapped on the little steamer.

Reaching the top, Zuko whistled.

"*Sqwwrk?!"*

Despite the desperate climb, Iroh caught himself chuckling. He didn't have to be an ostrich-horse to understand, *"What are you, crazy?!"*

"It's this or swim!" Zuko threatened, as the rest of the shore party latched on to the other two ladders. "Captain! Does anybody have a rope?"

A coil flung down, and Zuko whistled again. "Come on, sweetheart. Do this, and we'll find you some more nasty men to chew on, I promise..."

"Wrrgh." Gurgling hennish imprecations under her breath, Asahi snatched the rope, and latched onto steel rungs.

And that is all of us, Iroh thought, accepting a hand up from a seaman as *Suzuran's* engines revved and they started pulling away. A risky move, with half their number injured and still climbing. But far less perilous than lingering near shore with earthbenders-

The sea trembled, and Jee swore. "Cut engines!"

This crash... was less jarring. But not by much.

Iroh righted himself, and glared over the side at rocks grounding their ship.

"Char and blast that general, since when do they take to the damn water..." Captain Jee was fuming beside him, steam rising from the normally collected firebender's breath. "*Suzuran* may not look like much, but we've got good hulls. He won't be punching through any time soon."

"But it will not take long for him to start a ramp or tunnel this way," Iroh agreed grimly. "Gang is overconfident, and allows the rougher of his men unseemly license, but he is not a fool. We need to prepare for the boarding..."

A clank of steel and chains, and a half-drenched Asahi sputtered up and over the rail. Clawed the steel deck, and glared at Zuko.

And shook herself, deliberately, over everything in the vicinity.

"Sorry," Zuko sighed, one hand up to shield his eyes as he checked a marine's arm. "Simple break," he told a hovering Teruko. "I can show somebody how to heal it after we get out of this."

"Carry on, Rikiya," Teruko instructed. Dropped her voice as they moved away. "How are we getting out of this, sir?"

I don't know. I don't have a clue. We were so close, it's not fair...

Since when had his life been fair? These people *needed* him. "I'm working on it."

Taking a breath that tasted of sea and smoke, Zuko walked to the rail, eyeing the ring of stone below water, hemming them in. *Solid as the wall of Ba Sing Se*, he thought grudgingly, ducking out of habit as a trebuchet flung fire toward the shore. Drilled-in lessons of trajectory and geometry *told* him it wouldn't come near, but with enough angry firebenders around, you could never be sure. *Terrific. So we just need a year and a half to bash it down, or the Mechanist's crazy drill...*

Frowning at the water, Zuko swirled two fingers. Watched at tiny patch of wave twist, just that same spiral motion.

A drill spirals to cut a straight line. Like you try to make a missile spiral, make it spin, so it'll cut through the air...

Mouth dry, Zuko swallowed. Looked at Teruko, eyes wide; trying not to think too hard, in case his fragile plan burned to ash in the wind. "Do we have any oil?"

"I could-" Aang started.

"No!" Sokka hissed, holding onto an armful of squirming airbender as they all crouched behind Toph's reinforced wall. "You're hurt, damn it! That's fire out there, and I can't believe nobody on *Suzuran's* plastered us yet! On top of that - see that fancy uniform? That's got to be the general. We're not having good luck with generals lately."

Toph felt earth grumble out under the water all the way to steel, and bit her lip. She could break *Suzuran* loose. Here. Now. Even with the whole Earth Army bunch working against her. Probably.

Which might work out for Zuko, but would majorly suck for their little bunch. 'Cause there'd be no way the general and his guys would miss landing on her like a ton of bricks, and if they grabbed her they'd take a good look at Aang, and the Water Tribe parka Sokka had pulled over his head just wouldn't cut it as a disguise.

And she'd *told* Zuko. When the chips were down, she wanted Aang to win.

And she did *not* have a lump in her throat from knowing Zuko would understand. That heck, Sparky would probably even agree with her. He'd risked it all to make sure Aang got clear of Azula and Long Feng, no way would he want some truce-breaking scum like this General Gang scooping him up. No lump. At all.

Get out. Get away. You're the Dragon of the West, Uncle. Think of something!

And please, please, please let it be something that didn't leave any more screams behind. The smell of flesh seared right through the skin before sand could be bent away... Toph shivered.

"How could he," Katara whispered with loathing. "All those people..."

Hakoda gripped her shoulder, comforting. "I think it looks worse than it is."

"Says the man who's missed being scorched," Bato said grimly.

"I didn't say it was pleasant," Hakoda said gravely. "But it doesn't look like anyone's dead." His voice went dark. "Considering the situation, that's more than they deserve."

They tried to kill Zuko.

Toph swallowed, feeling again those frantic moments when she'd tried to pull Sparky out. But the rest of the army had been too close, squeezing him down, and it'd been all she could do to keep him from being dragon-paste-

Until he'd fought back where earthbenders couldn't bend, with water and fire. The moment she'd felt his heart race, she'd known the army was in for it. In for *what*, she hadn't imagined. Spirits.

Uncle warned us. Zuko warned us. He's gotta save his people. He's gotta stay alive.

He's through playing nice.

"I don't get it!" Sokka sputtered. "Why? We had a truce! They were *leaving!*"

"Because Uncle's the Dragon of the West," Toph said, fighting to keep her voice steady. "We never met him like that. He's *retired*. But I heard bits of stories, growing up. He scares people, Sokka. He scares generals like the Fire Lord scares *you*. Only way worse." She shook her head. "Why'd you think Zuko *wanted* us to think he was still after Aang? So everybody'd go after *him*. Not Uncle. Uncle's all Zuko's got left. He'd step in front of an avalanche for Uncle. He'd let us all hate him, for Uncle." She swallowed, and pointed at a heart fluttering like a dragon-fly. "He'd let *you* hate him."

Aang gulped. Looked out across the flame-strewn beach, determined, raising a hand-

Sucked in a hiss of pain, fighting not to cry as Katara held him. "All those people..."

"Asked for it," Hakoda said grimly. "I know this isn't the way of your people, Aang. But we had a truce with the prince, and he honored it. He's *still* honoring it. We've seen those fireballs hit land before. If that ship wanted to hit us, they would have by now..." The chief's voice died. "That's not good, is it?"

"Ah... no." Sokka gulped. "Definitely not good."

"What?" Toph demanded impatiently. Honestly, sometimes, seeing people-!

"Zuko's... looking this way," Sokka said, still shaky.

"Yeah? So?"

"...He's smirking."

Oh. *Oh*. Oh boy. Toph grinned like a leopard-shark. "Keep talking, Sokka. I want to hear *everything*-"

She heard the roar first. Crackling, sizzling; like hot oil someone had thrown water into-

Felt an odd, contrary, pulling breeze on her cheek, and realized *exactly* what Zuko was up to.

"Oh, man," Sokka whispered.

Burnt oil, boiling salt; the scent smacked Toph's nose with the roaring wind. Not a gale, or one of Aang's blasting winds. Air was only an innocent bystander, sucked down with a scream in twisting water to feed the fire binding it like a ribbon of knives.

Like a drill.

Toph felt it bite into the stone around *Suzuran*, snarling like a tiger-dillo having a really bad day. Rock didn't break, it *pulverized*; seared and shattered to silt in the waves, too fast for the stunned army earthbenders to react.

A roar of engines, a shudder, and she felt *Suzuran* yank free.

Katara was shaking like a leaf. "He... how... that can't be Zuko!"

"Sparky's been practicing," Toph said bluntly, heart still racing. Braced and ready to slam a shield of earth up over them at any twitch of the shore that would signal an oncoming wave.

Don't do it, Sparky. I know you're mad. I know you're hurt. I know Uncle said dragons are predators - and bat-wolves don't let hurt prey go, they just don't.

But you're people too, Sparky. You can do this. I know you can...

Wind gusted, and died.

"He - it fell apart," Sokka said, dazed. "He let it go... wait, what's Iroh - *get down!*"

Bato and Hakoda flattened them all.

Toph almost didn't hear the crackle. Though she felt hairs prick up on her neck, and tasted ozone-

Lightning crashed like a dying mountain.

Ears ringing, Toph flattened her hands on the sand. Swallowed, feeling glass where the beach under the army's center had been, and in the middle of that...

"General Gang is down!"

Done.

Iroh sighed, lowering his hands. It gave him no joy to see Gang fall. No joy... but yes, a certain grim satisfaction.

Try to kill my nephew, will you? I think not.

Though tactically, there were far better reasons to see the man dead. Zuko's daring and cleverness had won them free once, but General Gang might still have rallied his forces to trap them again. And Gang *would* have tried, desperately; for Gang was not a fool. He might have loathed the Fire Nation with every fiber in him, but he would have *known* what he had just seen. And how great a danger it would be to his people.

Earth was stability and tradition. The Earth Kingdom recoiled from adopting change, even for the better. But that did not mean they did not *recognize* it... and their brighter officers knew it was flexibility and innovation on the battlefield, far more than fire, that made Fire Nation forces so deadly.

Healing. Hot water. Searing sand. And now, fire-wreathed waterspouts that could shatter stone. Zuko had shown, plainly, he could bend unlike any firebender General Gang would have ever seen.

Had Gang taken them, no one of their ship would have been allowed to survive.

But Earth Kingdom armies were heir to all the respect for tradition of their nation. Especially respect for rank and noble birth. Cut off the head, and like the scorpion-viper, the rest of the body would thrash uselessly.

"Uncle..."

"They could not be allowed to pursue us further," Iroh sighed. "And you know they would not have stopped."

"...I know."

And quite miserable Zuko looked to know it, indeed. *He has your heart, Ursa. Gentle, for all his rage. Agni, let him keep it.* "He knew we were there under truce, and given the speed of his attack,

he likely knew *who* he was attacking," Iroh said, loud enough for the crew to hear. "Meaning he came, deliberately, for two of Sozin's line." He shrugged. "If a fool wishes to commit suicide, sometimes all one can do is oblige him."

That won grins from the crew. But Zuko swallowed, looking aside. "You were retired. You *liked* being retired."

"No one harms one of my clan without consequences," Iroh said levelly. "I had hope that healing would not rouse their ire... but I failed to take into account Xiu's presence. She must have told them how you disguised it. Bending hot water..." He sighed. "Well. It must have been enough."

Zuko flinched.

None too subtly, Teruko glared.

Iroh blinked, thought over what he'd said, and tried not to sigh. "They would have come for us regardless. Azula spread that accursed poster far too widely-"

"I hated acting like him."

Ah. Now he could see the shudders, hidden behind hands calming damp black feathers. That could not have been pleasant, for one who had tried so hard to end things peacefully. "You did not," Iroh said plainly. "My brother would never have allowed the option of leaving without bloodshed." The more fool he. "Come. Let us see to our wounded."

Zuko shivered again, subtly. Drew a deep breath, and straightened. "Lieutenant. Who's the worst?"

"How could you let them get away-!"

Shaken and numb and angry all at once, Sokka stood a few feet back from where his dad was facing down Colonel Mohe, and tried to make sense of the morning.

Iroh killed the general. Iroh. But he's always been... and what Zuko said to Katara... burn our whole fleet? Zhao would do that, sure, but Zuko's not...

Sokka put his head down, and breathed. And tried not to laugh hysterically, knowing whose advice he was taking.

He told us. He told us we didn't know... that he'd never tried to kill us...

And it looked like Zuko hadn't lied. Again.

And that's just wrong. It just is, how come the guy who - who was trying to catch us never lies, and Aang does...

Mind going in circles, Sokka forced himself to focus on the important things. Katara was with the wounded she could still help, treating sears. Toph had Aang and Momo half-burrowed out of sight in a little sandstone shelter, ready to play helpless little scared blind girl for all she was worth if they were found. And Appa was back behind a few of the dunes the army hadn't tramped over. That should hide him for now, unless things got worse.

Yeah. And why wouldn't they? the sarcastic voice in his head pointed out.

You hush, Sokka told himself. *I've got enough problems.*

Problems like the angry earthbender officer in front of Hakoda, who stopped just short of poking the Water Tribe chief in the chest.

Unimpressed, Hakoda eyed the colonel. "You were throwing earth, and they were throwing fire, and I had injured children to keep out of the fight. What, exactly, did you expect us to do?"

"*Not* let murderers *sail away*-!"

"Colonel Mohe." Hakoda's voice was calm, but there was something in his eyes Sokka had seen before. Just before firebenders had charged their village. Hard and dangerous, like a drawn sword. "Would you like to tell me why your general attacked our camp, when Sergeant Huizhong knew there was a truce holding?"

"A *truce*?" the colonel sputtered. "You actually meant to hold to that? With the Fire Nation?"

"I think I see where my daughter picked up the attitude," Hakoda said dryly. "Not with the Fire Nation. With this ship. Prince Zuko may be as lethal as any of them, but he's never given me reason to doubt his word."

"*Prince Zuko*?" The colonel's lip curled. "As if that cast-off brat had any authority to negotiate anything!"

"The captain of the ship seemed to think so," Hakoda said levelly.

"Hah!" Colonel Mohe smirked. "I suppose they'd been on the water just as long as you have! That's rich." A snort. "Good news, then. When they learn the truth, they'll kill him for us."

"Truth?" Hakoda said warily.

"You haven't heard? Everyone's wondered why the brat was banished, for years... The Fire Lord himself burned the boy and cast him out! I suppose rumors of that *woman* he married were all too true... why else would a Princess vanish, if they weren't shamed she even existed? That bastard has no more right to noble blood than one of their damn komodo-rhinos!"

Sokka swallowed, the world reeling around him. Hearing Xiu, only a day before. "*Some firebender put his fist in Lee's face...*"

His father. Zuko's dad did that... Sokka clutched his head, feeling like his brain wanted to explode. Dads didn't *do* something like that!

And sisters don't try to kill you. Oh man...

A hawk cried out overhead, and something small, hard, and thankfully light bounced off his skull.

Circling with empty talons, the messenger hawk headed smugly back out to sea.

Rubbing his head, Sokka eyed the bird for a possible boomerang slice. Decided it was more trouble than it was worth, and picked up the little lacquered red and black cylinder. Had to open somehow... oh. Screwed together. Neat. And inside-

Sokka read the scrap of paper, and gulped. "Dad?"

Frowning, Hakoda took the message. And went very, very still.

Sokka winced, the acerbic text still fresh in his mind.

Chief Hakoda. I grow tired of watching people try to kill my nephew.

-And yes. You may, most certainly, consider this a threat.

"Don't think I'll ever get used to seeing those," Huojin muttered, watching the scarlet speck of a messenger hawk circle above Ba Sing Se.

Sitting beside him near the roof edge, Captain Lu-shan snorted. Usually, Huojin knew, the strengthening sunlight at the end of shift brightened the captain's mood. Today... not so much.

"I keep thinking I'm going to wake up, and find out I had bad pickled beets for dinner," Lu-shan said bleakly. Shook his head. "Oma and Shu. One teenage girl took down Ba Sing Se? I don't care if she is of Sozin's accursed house-

"You should, sir," Huojin interrupted. "That's how she did it. How she's holding the Dai Li. She's... they're not *like* other firebenders. They *burn*. And it draws people. Especially people who've got that killer instinct. Like firebenders... and like the Dai Li." He glanced at his suddenly wary captain. "Or so I've heard."

"Right," Lu-shan said at last. "Huojin. Why didn't you turn them in? And don't tell me it was the Avatar," the captain added dryly. "You've worked the streets too long to let one idiot bender kid get to you."

"Maybe not," Huojin admitted. "Captain. We both know the streets. And we know there's scum, and there are honest citizens, and that's usually pretty much that. And from what I've heard about Ozai and Azula... yeah. They're scum." He sighed. "But we both know, even in a family of citizens, sometimes somebody goes crooked. And there's nothing anybody can do about it." He glanced at Lu-shan. "And sometimes, just sometimes... even in a family of crooks, one kid will go straight."

Lu-shan took that in a moment, and shook his head. "*The Dragon of the West*."

"Is one damn scary guy if his nephew's in trouble," Huojin admitted. "Other than that? He's *retired*, sir. I've seen people like him off the Wall. You know plenty of them. Soldiers who've just seen enough people die. They'll fight if they have to, but... Spirits, he was *happy* to see Amaya teaching his nephew. Proud as a father. You can't fake that."

"Hmm." The captain didn't sound convinced. "You risked your career - and the Avatar's displeasure, *and* the Dai Li - because you think Prince Zuko might be a good kid. The *Fire Prince*?"

Huojin shrugged. "Can't think of a better reason to risk it, sir."

Captain Lu-shan rubbed at what seemed to be a headache. "I don't know you at all, do I?"

"What? Sir, of course you-"

Scarlet feathers swooped down.

"...Um." Huojin looked at the hawk perched on one unwary wrist, yellow eyes glinting. Looked at the captain. "I've never seen this bird before in my life?"

Lu-shan raised an eyebrow, amused and wary at once. "Probably for someone inside."

"Probably," Huojin said levelly, carefully extracting the thin roll of paper from the cylinder on the hawk's back. Wary of that fierce, hooked beak... though the bird seemed just as amused as the captain.

"Huojin." Lu-shan's voice was quiet, catching him just before he could unroll fine paper. "You've got a whole life here."

I know. Spirits, I know. "Captain." Huojin had to swallow before he could go on. "Luli and I... we've talked about this. A lot. Amaya's in trouble. I don't... I don't think you get how *much* trouble, sir. Azula's *in the palace*. She knows about the Earth King, and who treats that crazy bear of his. She knows Amaya *trained Lee*." He swallowed again, throat dry. "She's going to turn over every Ring, every street, every *rock*, to find her. Amaya *has* to get out."

Lu-shan sighed. "It's your neck." He paused. "And your family's."

I know. Taking a deep breath, Huojin unrolled the scrap.

Hey Umbrella. We're coming.

Not signed. Just the fancy flowing symbol Amaya had taught him meant Water, in a brown that didn't match the rest of the ink-

That's not ink.

Nose to the paper, he could still catch a faint wisp of cold smoke.

Leave it to Lee to char a Water symbol, Huojin thought wryly. *Oh spirits, they're alive. They're alive, and they're coming back-*

Footsteps. Huojin tucked the message up his sleeve with a speed learned from outfoxing young pickpockets, and turned an innocent gaze toward Master Sergeant Yakume.

"We're not expecting a hawk," the Fire Nation soldier said dryly. Held out a wrist for the bird to hop onto, and efficiently checked the cylinder. "No message-? Oh, Agni. *Suzuran*."

Huh? Blinking, Huojin looked again at the hawk's harness, tracing out what had looked like subtle ornamentation. It'd been decades, but High Court wasn't *like* regular writing. Just a five-score of symbols, easy enough for even a child to remember.

FNS Suzuran.

"I take it Suzuran's someone you don't like?" Captain Lu-shan said dryly.

"Not a who, Captain. *Suzuran* is a ship," Yakume said civilly. "A supply ship, to be accurate. Manned with-" He grimaced. "Well. I'm sure they'll be no more problem in port than any other sea-mad crew. They're not *criminal*, just... boneheaded screw-ups." He nodded toward the hawk. "As you can see."

"The Army knows about supply ships?" Huojin dared to ask.

"We have a vested interest in them," Yakume said dryly. "But as it happens, I know a lot about this one. The captain's had the dubious honor of having pursued the Avatar - and *surviving* - longer than any other officers besides General Iroh and Prince Zuko himself. Including that sea-spirit mess at the North Pole." He smiled wryly. "A wise man keeps track of people with luck like that."

"Tell me about it," Huojin muttered, rubbing his throat.

"The *tsukumogami*," Yakume nodded, after a moment's thought. "Exactly how did the prince get it off you without revealing himself?"

"What, you don't think he just yanked it off?" Huojin said warily.

"In point of fact, he could have," Yakume replied, gold eyes level. "I was on campaign with the Dragon of the West, years ago; I have seen certain... internal uses of chi that can allow a firebender to confront a spirit physically. I've never heard of another bending style being able to do so. Even your Dai Li use iron; it can't be bent, which I imagine prevents a spirit turning it on them, but it *is* of earth, and carries their chi. Chi stops a spirit. Flesh and bone - and even steel, Agni watch over our lost - do *not*." He looked over them both. "So. How?"

Tell him, don't tell him... oh what the heck, let's blow his mind. "Hot water," Huojin said frankly, feeling Lu-shan's eyes on him.

Yakume stared at him.

"I'm getting the feeling that's just as weird as Mushi - er, sorry, General Iroh - said it was," Huojin said, puzzled. "Hasn't anybody ever tried that before?"

"If they had, they certainly wouldn't try it in sight of most of the Earth Kingdom," Yakume said tartly. "Your armies have a century-old policy of *eliminating* firebenders who show original techniques. If they have to wipe out a whole household with blasting jelly to do it."

Huojin flinched. But the captain...

Captain Lu-shan didn't look surprised. And that... hurt.

Even so, there was something odd about the way Yakume had said that. *Like somebody has tried it before*, Huojin thought. But if that were true, why had Iroh been so surprised?

More to the point, why was Yakume even talking to them like this? For a guy who said he didn't like Earth Kingdom people, he wasn't acting like he'd rather be anywhere else-

Gold met water-bent green, and Huojin tried not to sweat. "Um... where are you taking that hawk?"

"I'm going to feed her, Guard Huojin," Yakume said dryly. "And then, Captain Jee is going to get a few words about careless expenditures of military assets."

Head high, he stalked out of sight.

"That was... weird," Captain Lu-shan said quietly.

And way too easy, Huojin knew. Even so, he couldn't help feeling like he wanted to giggle.

Lu-shan did a double-take, and edged back. "No," he protested.

Huojin grinned.

"No," Lu-shan repeated, incredulous. "Not a chance. He's... Oma and Shu, he's a *teenager*. He *couldn't* have."

Huojin tried not to snicker. "Captain. Did you ever wonder how the Avatar got his bison back?" Leaning back a little, he smirked. "It *was* locked up down in Dai Li headquarters."

"In Dai Li..." Lu-shan groaned.

"Until Lee tracked down the Blind Bandit," Huojin said, more soberly. "Still think I should have turned them in?"

Lu-shan buried his head in his hands.

A ship. Huojin took a deep breath, joy a bubble of rainbow inside him. *Oh Agni, kid; how'd you pull that off?*

One ship against the might of the Fire Nation. Not enough to win back Ba Sing Se, not by a long shot...

But he could taste the sea in the wind. And it breathed of freedom.

Since some people have been asking... this is only a partial bibliography. I have a lot stored in my head from reading... well, most stuff I can get my hands on.

Meditations on Violence, by Rory Miller. If you read just one book on this list, make it this one. It'll tell you why there is a gap - better make that a yawning abyss - between Zuko and Aang's viewpoints on reality. Spirituality and violence are not incompatible. A lot of monks in Japan were retired bushi. The way canon sets up the Air Temples, they lack that... and that makes a big difference.

Deep Survival, by Laurence Gonzales.

Ainu: Spirit of a Northern People by William W. Fitzhugh and Chisato O. Dubreuil.

The Conquest of Ainu Lands: Ecology and Culture in Japanese Expansion, 1590-1800 by Brett L. Walker.

- I highly recommend this one for anyone who wants a look at how Water Tribe/Fire Nation interactions might realistically work, with no waterbenders involved to even out the firepower.

China's golden age: everyday life in the Tang dynasty, by Charles Benn.

Early Modern Japan by Conrad D. Totman.

Green Archipelago: Forestry In Pre-Industrial Japan (Ecology & History) by Conrad Totman and Jr. James L.A. Webb.

Ninja AD 1460-1650 (Warrior) by Stephen Turnbull

The Samurai Invasion of Korea 1592-98 (Campaign) by Stephen Turnbull,

And many others of his books.

What Cops Know and Pure Cop by Connie Fletcher.

The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals That Protect Us from Violence by Gavin de Becker.

On Combat, The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and in Peace by Dave Grossman.

The Anatomy of Motive by John Douglas and Mark Olshaker.

Wetlands by William J. Mitsch and James G. Gosselink.

www. sciencedaily. com (take out spaces) is always interesting for inspiration.

en. wikipedia wiki/Tupilaq

en. wikipedia wiki/Each_uisge

-For anyone who thinks spirits are friendly. Um, no.

Chapter End Notes

I do feel sorry for Aang. Hear all those pedestals smashing? He's a gentle soul who belongs up in a monastery where everyone's peaceful and kind. But the world just isn't like that.

And when Zuko cools down some, he'll probably feel sorry for Aang too. Which is way, way different than having regrets about what he did...

The Fire Nation felt it had reasons for the war of conquest. That doesn't make it right. It's taken Zuko a while to put that together; he was taught all his life the Fire Nation were, unreservedly, the good guys, and changing ingrained beliefs takes time even with substantial evidence in front of you. He and Iroh just want to make the Gaang realize that there were reasons behind the war; it wasn't just because the Fire Nation as a whole is power-hungry. There are no excuses for what happened to the Air Nomads, and the world. But there are reasons.

A note on the spirit-touched and finding love: given the Fire Nation's ancestry, they're all a little touched. Which is one reason Meixiang fell hard for Tingzhe, though he'd survived the same moonless night Shirong did. So Zuko and Iroh are perfectly acceptable as chick-magnets... to other Fire Nation girls. Of course, this also means other nations tend to find the Fire Nation in general... a little spooky. Which does not help in making peace one bit.

A note on nails: people tend to judge "normal" by themselves. If Zuko's used to climbing rock walls bare-handed (which we see in canon), any less strength than that would be considered "fragile".

Finally, Katara. All cultural issues aside... never, ever underestimate the impact of losing a mother on a child. Zuko actually got luckier than Katara, canon; he was older, and he believes there's a chance his mother is alive. It is strongly implied Katara watched her mother's murder. And after that, according to Sokka, she becomes the mother of the household, looking after everyone, always the optimist. Meaning she buried all that grief and anger to function... and that's very, very bad.

In a way, Zuko's seething temper tantrums through much of the first two seasons are a lot healthier. He's mad at the world. That may not be healthy or sane, but it's honest. And as long as you're honest with yourself, you have a chance to stop and look at your own behavior, and fix it.

Katara is not honest. Katara is sweetness and confidence and "we're going to help Aang save the world!" Until she runs into something she doesn't like, at which point the Sugar Queen cracks, and a lot of nastiness oozes out.

In *I Could Do Anything, If I Only Knew What It Was*, Barbara Sher describes the *rage against the ordinary*. Ragers are charismatic, often skilled, often geniuses. They work hard, they may be good at what they do - but they want to be the absolute best.

Without having to start from the bottom. Or put up with the ordinary scutwork the rest of us take for granted. They charm people around them into fixing their problems, over and over again. And they always have problems. Because when they were young, they were horribly betrayed by the world - and they want to be rescued. More than anything in the world. Katara's central motivating idea - the Avatar will return - fits the rager's profile point by point. 1) Her fantasy requires the act of an outsider to come true. 2) The end is a rescue or reward that comes only to special people. 3) She'll be "discovered" as special (the last Southern waterbender). 4) Her life is pointless without this happy ending.

This can be fixed. Ragers can learn to find the root of their problems, and move past it. But it takes hard work, self-examination, and admitting a little brat inside you wants something it can never have. Katara can break out of this - if she listens, really listens to her family and friends, and realizes that she wants, desperately, for someone to make things right. To rescue the little girl who lost her mother, and grew up too soon.

Except in canon the creators hooked her up with Aang, who wants to be mothered and have excuses to be irresponsible.

(Insert writer banging own head against wall.)

...Yeah. That relationship is going to end so well. I think I'll take my chances with Azula...

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Course set, hulls are sound; thank Agni they didn't have time to hole us, Captain Jee thought, heading down to the main deck. The crew seems to be holding steady, even if they are a bit nervous at having two princes on board.

He couldn't blame them for that. It was one thing to read in the history books of the power of the Fire Lord's line. It was quite another to *see* it. And beyond mere fire, what Prince Zuko had done...

Though in a way, what he was up to now was even more unnerving.

"It's a push," the prince was saying, for what sounded like at least the third time. Iroh was standing back, for now; watching. "You have to make the fire more than it is. Not more intense. Not hotter. Different. Like ice melting."

From the dubious looks, the rest of the ship's firebenders weren't getting it any better than Jee was. Though the way Lieutenant Teruko was chewing her lip had some promise, and...

Jee halted where he stood, eyeing the startled expression of the last firebender he'd expected to find anywhere *near* a healing tutorial. "Lieutenant Sadao?"

"It... sounds kind of like glass, sir," Sadao said hesitantly. "When it's cold, if you hit it, it breaks. But when it's hot... it's *different*. It lets you work with it." He stopped, frustrated. "I'm not saying it right..."

"Get over here," Zuko said abruptly. "Don't try to think. Just follow me. I'll catch you if something goes wrong."

"If something goes *wrong*?" someone said dubiously.

"A waterbender depends on the rhythm of the tides, and is safe," Iroh declared. "We are depending on the rhythm of our own hearts. And that is... not safe. If one grips too tightly." He shrugged slightly. "We are children of *fire*. Agni grants us much, but *safe* is not his gift." He nodded at Sadao. "Indeed, Lieutenant, I would suggest you make the attempt. Healing is an outward fire, not inward. You, more than many of us, may be well suited to this technique."

Sadao swallowed visibly. But joined the prince by the barrel of fire, hands barely shaking.

"Don't worry. You don't have to be calm for this," Zuko said practically. "It might be better if you're not. This is a lot more like a fight than you think."

"A fight?" Sadao perked up. "But it's healing."

"Ever had a healer tie you to a bed, glare you down, and force-feed you painkillers to work on you?" Zuko said dryly. "Healers don't have to be nice. They just have to think." His voice gentled a bit. "But we don't have to think right now. We just need to find the rhythm. Us, and the fire." He lowered his hands, taking a breath. "Follow me."

*Oh, good work, General, Jee thought, glancing Iroh's way as the prince played with fire. Smooth, deliberately slow; breath infusing each motion, as Zuko drew out a ball of flame and *changed* it. I*

don't know what you did, but you finally hammered patience into that young man's head. Agni, we may have a chance after all...

Jee's jaw dropped, as specks of green blazed in Sadao's flame like falling stars.

The lieutenant swallowed, looking at trembling, empty hands. "...I lost it."

"That's okay." There was a smile on Zuko's face; small, but there. "That's *fine*. I fought with this for weeks before I could get it to settle, even with Uncle helping- that was *it*, Lieutenant!"

I never doubted you could do it.

Jee could hear it, clear as if the prince had spoken. Could see those silent words impact Sadao, in the sudden, sober determination in the lieutenant's eyes. And spread farther, touching every listening crewman with a sense of honor recognized.

Iroh had drifted back beside him, and Jee shook his head. "How is he doing that, sir?" Jee murmured. "I've been working on Sadao for months..."

"But in the classic style, which we know is of the mountain clans, and focuses on the inner fire," Iroh murmured back. "While my nephew - and, it seems, Sadao as well - is more adept at *outer* fire." He laughed softly. "I feel quite the stubborn old fool. It was under my nose all along; I cannot count the times he has bent *other* fires. But that is not the thrust of our style, so I thought nothing of it..." He sighed. "I have been forcing a wave to play a mountain's part. The wonder is not that he failed so often, but that he has done so well."

"It's more than that," Jee admitted. "Sir, Teruko thinks..."

"I well know what she thinks," Iroh said dryly. "Given Avatar Aang recounts knowing Kuzon's *dragon companion* Shidan, what she thinks may not be impossible." The general looked thoughtful. "But my nephew has something more precious than dragon's blood. He has a task worthy of a prince of our people, and the determination to see it through." Iroh's smile held quiet pride. "He has *hope*, Captain. He knows the odds we face, he knows our peril - and yet, he has stood his ground against spirits, and Azula, and the Avatar himself. And he is *still here*."

"Hope," Jee echoed quietly. Thinking of Nara, and disaster, and a beloved touch he would never feel again.

"It hurts, to hope again." Iroh acknowledged. "But I promise you, Captain - we will have more allies than you yet know. In the most unlikely of places."

Jee looked at him askance. "*What* allies?"

Eyes dancing, Iroh gestured toward the west, where a half-moon hung pale in the morning sky.

Jee swallowed. "But... we're..."

"Children of her brother, and loyal to one who respects and honors her," Iroh said plainly. "He does not *venerate* her, but he does love, fiercely... The Water Tribes believe waterbenders are *blessed*, Captain. Let the world's spirits hate the Fire Nation; La has raised her hands to shield us." He nodded once. "We are sailors. Let us see where this tide may take us."

Breathe. Just... breathe. Sadao gripped the observation deck's railing, selfishly grateful the captain

had ordered everyone who'd tried fire-healing to take a few hours off. Trying to bend fire the way *nobody* ought to bend it had left headaches and bad tempers scattered through the crew, and the captain wanted them to get their edge back before anything *else* could go wrong.

Sadao didn't have a headache. But he didn't want to go back on watch, either. He felt... off. And afraid.

So what else is new?

"Captain Jee said you'd be up here."

Sadao started. *He moves like a ghost!* "Sir-"

"At ease," Prince Zuko said quietly. "May I join you? It's dusty in the files."

"Of... course." Sadao swallowed, glancing down as the prince gripped the rail. If the whispers were true, all it would take would be the flick of a sharpening stone, and those nails could cut his throat...

Of course, rumors exaggerated. Usually.

"I'm not good at speeches," the prince said abruptly. "But the first time I knew I could do this, I was scared."

Wide-eyed, Sadao listened.

"Hurting people is easy. It's so easy. Fire *wants* to burn. And you're alive, and he's dead, and - that's it. Helping people..." The prince grimaced. "They're counting on you, and you don't know enough, it *never* feels like enough. And it's worse because you care. You have to care. Fire is life, it's love, it's *I will not let them die*. That's what you use. That's how you change the fire. You have to give it part of you." He winced. "And it feels like walking unarmored into the middle of your enemies."

Sadao wet his lips. "You've... done that. Haven't you, sir."

"Doesn't make it easier," Prince Zuko said wryly. "I'm just - damn it, Lieutenant. If you weren't scared trying this, there'd be something *wrong* with you."

"Thank you, sir," Sadao said uncertainly. *I think.*

"Don't thank me yet," the prince said dryly. "If they made Jee captain of this ship, I know what kind of people ended up on her."

Sadao bristled. *That's why he was in the files!* "Sir, with all due respect-!"

"Easy, Lieutenant." The prince was smiling, damn him. "I said I know. And I do. I have confidence in Captain Jee. I *know* he's built a good crew." Pale gold eyed him. "Problem is, *you* don't know it."

Which was so much the last thing Sadao expected to hear, he just stood there. Gaping.

"It's easy being a failure," Prince Zuko said bluntly. "It hurts all the time, but... you get numb. No one expects anything." He smirked. "But I've got news for you. You're caught."

"...Erk?" Sadao managed.

"You can't be a failure at this. You just got started." The smirk deepened. "So enjoy your time off. Once General Iroh and I get a schedule set with the captain? We're going to work you into the

deck."

...Eeep.

"*Suzuran's* long gone, our *allies* are twiddling their thumbs trying to figure out if they're going to send to Ba Sing Se for orders, and my, would you look at that. It's almost noon," Bato said dryly.

"I can see that," Hakoda sighed, gazing toward the hole Toph had opened in the sand for fresh air.

"Hmm." Bato eyed the little group barely in view. "Think you should handle this alone?"

"No," Hakoda said reluctantly, after a moment's internal struggle. "I want to be her father... but I *need* to be her chief."

Bato nodded, and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Best to get it over with, then."

Says the man who isn't their father. Which wasn't fair to Bato. But right now, Hakoda didn't feel like being fair.

You're chief. You're stuck with it. Do your duty. Resolute, he approached the children.

Sokka saw him first, comforting grin fading into a sober look. Katara glanced up from comforting Aang, and stiffened. "He was lying."

Not a good start. "Colonel Mohe?" Hakoda said, deliberately misunderstanding. "Yes, I think he was. If there's one thing we've learned facing the Fire Nation, it's that they take personal insults... well, personally. The Fire Lord might attack his wife for betraying him, but Zuko?" He shook his head. "I think the colonel would *like* to believe his story. The Earth Kingdom respects noble blood and rank. Breaking our truce with *Suzuran* would be a lot easier to justify to his superiors if Zuko weren't a prince at all."

Beside him, he could almost feel Bato trying not to roll his eyes.

"That's not what she meant," Aang said firmly. "And you know that, sir."

"Yes, I do," Hakoda admitted. "But Zuko will keep. My daughter bending our hearts to the point we almost broke a truce, will not." He frowned. "I'd like to have a long talk with this Master Pakku. There are reasons our ancestors left the North, and he's just reminded us of most of them."

"Katara would never do that!" Aang protested. "I know Zuko said - well, awful things - but he doesn't *know* her. And Master Pakku's kind of cranky... but he's a great waterbender!"

"He's a *Northern* waterbender," Hakoda said firmly. "A Southern waterbender would never interfere with a chief's decisions this way." He fixed Aang with a stern look. "As far as not knowing Katara, or any of you... I'm told you're a vegetarian, Aang. You don't hunt, so you have no idea what hunting requires. First and foremost, you must *understand your prey*." Hakoda drew a deep breath of salt air, and longed for the chill of home. "Zuko hunted you near half a year, across the face of the world. If he doesn't know you by now, no one does." Toph being the possible exception, Hakoda knew, judging the earthbender's deliberate silence. But Toph and Zuko seemed to understand each other quite well. Which might be *why* she was silent. If she understood a prince's role in the Fire Nation, she might have a far better grasp of the realities of a chief's duty than Aang with all his travels had yet managed.

"You can't believe him," Katara insisted. "I'm not like that! So I'm angry about Mom; why shouldn't I be? So some of the Fire Nation's going to die? Well, what do you know - what have they been doing to the whole world for a *hundred years!*"

And Hakoda *wanted* to agree with her, Kya's death was like a hole in his heart-

Deliberately, the chief made himself ignore it. "Stop that. Now."

Hate ebbed like the tide.

"That was you?" Aang said in disbelief. "All this time, everybody getting so mad - that was *you?*" He gaped, then shook his head. "Katara, why would you do that? Someone could've gotten hurt!"

"Somebody did!" Katara fired back, finger jabbing toward Bato. "Because of Zuko! Because he's nothing but a-"

"Sugar Queen." Toph's tone made the nickname a threat. "Finish that, and somebody *is* gonna get hurt. And it's not Bato."

"She's right," Bato said grimly. "If the men learn you've been doing this deliberately... there are no other women of the tribe here. But that doesn't mean things can't be... decided."

Sokka swallowed dryly. Toph shivered. Katara stared at her fellow tribesmen as if they'd been some trick of an evil spirit, now revealed in all its cannibal horror.

But it was the Avatar Hakoda watched, as the boy paled and leapt to Katara's defense. "How can you say that? Katara's one of the best people I've ever met! If she... almost hurt somebody... I'm sure it was a mistake." He gave Katara a reassuring smile. "So everything's fine, and we can get back to important stuff. Like ending the war."

Hakoda looked into the full force of that endearing grin, and refused to falter. "Everything is *not* fine. Katara. What you've been doing is wrong. We had a truce. A warrior's honor demanded that we hold it, and you were pushing us to break it. How could we have called ourselves men, after that? How could we ever have come home?"

As long as he lived, Hakoda knew he'd never forget the look on his daughter's face. Pale. Frightened. *Betrayed*.

Spirits. If only you were anyone's daughter but mine.

Aang's jaw dropped, and stunned gray eyes blinked at him. "But... you have to! They're waiting for you!"

"They're waiting for honorable warriors, and true men of the tribe," Hakoda said bluntly. "We would be nothing but rogue wolves, driven from the pack."

"So... like being banished?" Aang said hopefully. "Katara was banished, and that worked out okay."

I did not just hear that, Hakoda thought, stunned. "You were *what?*"

"Sokka threw Aang out of the village," Katara said defiantly. "He was *alone*. He needed somebody!"

Hakoda raised a brow at his son.

Sokka sighed, resigned. "I threw him out - and Gran-Gran backed me up - because he went to the Fire Navy wreck. And took you with him. The *forbidden* wreck?"

"A bender has to conquer fear!" Katara shot back.

"You want to conquer fear? How about taking your waterbending up against a polar bear? Or ice-dodging? Or - I don't know, *anything* besides going someplace built by the enemy, and full of traps! Where you set off a *booby-trap* that led Zuko right to our village!" He met Hakoda's gaze without excuses. "She wanted a waterbending teacher. Aang said he'd take her to the North Pole. She said she was banished, too. Aang talked her into coming back, and Gran-Gran let it go. I figured that should be the end of it."

Fair enough. And it should have been... if it hadn't left one young Avatar with entirely the wrong idea. "Aang," Hakoda said levelly. "What happened when one of your people did something unforgiveable?"

"Like what?"

Hakoda eyed the airbender, keeping a strong grip on his temper. *He is not that naive. No one is.*

Aang stared back just as hard, face unexpectedly firm. "Look. I know your tribe's... really different. And you feel like you have to do - awful things, sometimes. But we *didn't*. The temples were all places of peace and enlightenment. And a lot of fun, too. Ask Sokka. We didn't... *nobody* from the temples would *ever* do... what happened here today." He gulped. "I *liked* Iroh."

"Aang." Sokka's voice was quiet. "There were firebender skeletons all around Gyatso. I kind of don't think they just laid there and died."

"I *know*." The grief on Aang's face was awful to see. "I know, when you're fighting someone who wants to hurt you... I just can't see it. It'd be - like seeing Kuzon in that awful armor. Kuzon never wanted to hurt anybody. But I guess... I guess he..."

"He didn't." Toph crossed her arms. "I asked Iroh about him." At Aang's startled stumble, she shrugged. "He knew who you were talking about in the desert. I figured he might know more. Your friend Bumi made it through a hundred years; I thought maybe..." She shook her head. "He wasn't in the army, ever. A lot of his clan died 'cause they wouldn't do what Sozin wanted. So Kuzon ended up lord of Byakko. Even the Fire Lord couldn't drag him out of that, not if he didn't want things to be *really* messy. Kuzon was never in the war." She hesitated, fingers gripping her wristlets a little. "Not in armor, anyway."

"Oh man." Sokka winced. "Let me guess. Zuko's not the first guy in the family to go sneaking in green."

Toph grinned a little. "He promised Monk Gyatso he'd find Aang. He spent the rest of his life trying." She faced the airbender directly. "His *whole life*. That's what the Fire Nation *does* to keep their word. And yeah, they're crazy - but promises are important to us, too. Earth Kingdom *and* Water Tribe."

"I know that," Aang said defensively. "Why wouldn't I know that? I'm the Avatar, of course I know about..." He saw Hakoda's look, and swallowed.

"If you really knew that," Hakoda said quietly, "then you'd understand why what Katara did is so wrong." He looked straight at her. "A warrior's honor is a promise to his people. And to *himself*. That he will always behave with dignity, and courage. That he *will* abide by the ways of our

people, or willingly take the consequences. To force us to be angrier than we already were, to gouge at us with a hate that was not our own - it was *wrong*. And things are not *fine*." He straightened, and eyed the airbender once more. "Avatar Aang. Sokka tells me we have an opportunity to attack the Fire Nation directly. To *win*, at a time the Fire Lord will be helpless. Given the fall of Ba Sing Se to Azula, the plan to involve the Earth King's forces won't work. But I'm sure between Sokka and the rest of us, we can come up with something." He looked sober. "You're hurt, and it would be better if Katara could focus on healing you rather than fighting. I'm offering you the choice of travelling with the fleet, while you heal and we all work out a plan."

"Sounds great!" Aang perked up. "Thanks-"

"You'll be watched."

Caught mid-thought, Aang gaped at him. "But - Katara *said* she was sorry-"

"No," Hakoda said bluntly. "She did not." He glanced at his daughter. "Are you?"

"I..." Katara swallowed, and looked defiant. "I was trying to help. To do what was right!"

"You'll be watched," Hakoda repeated, heart heavy. "Katara. You're my daughter. I love you, and I missed you both, every day. But if this happens again, with either of you - yes, you too, Aang, we know you're a waterbender - I am the chief of our tribe. I *will* be forced to act."

"Against the Avatar?" Katara said in disbelief. "Like the Fire Nation?"

"For our people," Hakoda said bluntly, anger finally boiling over. "I'm not asking for the moon! Just the decency to leave our hearts *ours*. Let us help to restore the balance because *we* think it's right. Not because you do!"

Katara finally flinched. "Dad, I-"

"Stop," Hakoda said firmly. "*Behave*. Show us you are a true woman of the tribe. A Southern waterbender, who can be trusted." He switched his glare to Aang. "Bato tells me you proved yourself ice-dodging as an honorary member of the tribe. That honor carries responsibilities. Show us you can be trusted as well. Or you may have allies to throw back the Fire Nation, but as far as a world in balance, or peace..." Hakoda sighed. "Aang. How can there be peace in the world, if the world can't trust the Avatar?"

"I..." Aang swallowed. "I'm *trying*."

"I know," Hakoda said levelly. "I wish I could make it easier for you. But for now - you have to keep trying." *Or Zuko's nightmare will become the truth. And that will shatter us all.*

From the corner of his eye, Hakoda watched Asiavik approach, and wondered how much the graying healer had heard. Quite a bit, if that look of wry satisfaction was any clue.

Katara saw it too. And for a moment, just one, Hakoda saw her fear.

Oh daughter. I'm sorry. But this has to stop. And they have to know it's stopped.

"Hakoda," Asiavik said, face neutral once more. "That young Earth Kingdom lady is back." He glanced at Sokka and Katara. "She says she brought a letter for you."

"From Monk Yuan-ti, in the year of- This is an airbender letter!" Aang beamed, leaning back against a sandstone bench to read as they gathered around. "Three hundred and twenty years ago. Wow. This was old when *I* was born."

Like overcooked squid, Sokka thought ruefully, watching Xiu watch Aang. *You chew and you chew and you chew, and he just bounces back.*

At least Katara seemed to get that Dad was *really ticked off*. And kind of in a bind. He was the chief. And part of being the chief's kid was making sure Dad didn't have to worry about that. That he could treat you just like everybody else.

Most of the time, Katara knew that. *Most* of the time.

"It's hard to believe you're really over a hundred years old," Xiu said curiously. "I knew Kyoshi was two hundred and thirty when she died, and if what I've heard about Avatar Kuruk is true, he lived even longer, but-"

"Oh, I was frozen in an iceberg," Aang said cheerfully. "Until Katara broke me out with some awesome waterbending."

"It's true," Katara nodded, smiling. It only slipped a little when she glanced toward the rest of camp.

"Iceberg," Xiu muttered. "Remind me to be glad I'm not you."

"Right now, he's not him either, okay?" Sokka said pointedly. "We don't want word getting back to anyone in the Fire Nation that he's still alive. To anyone else in the Fire Nation," Sokka realized belatedly. "Oh, man..."

"Relax," Toph said seriously. "Sparky won't tell."

"We don't know that," Aang said sadly, looking up from the letter.

"No," Xiu allowed, "but there's a pretty good chance she's right. You haven't seen the size of the bounty on Zuko's head." She grimaced. "Trust me. Going anywhere near the Fire Nation, or anybody who deals with them, would be *really* stupid."

And Zuko's not stupid, Sokka finished to himself. *Obsessed, crazy, too stubborn to lie down and die - but he's not stupid.*

"So... where's your boyfriend?" Katara asked, obviously hoping to divert the conversation anywhere else.

"We had a fight," Xiu said sadly. Smiled, just a little wry. "He tucked me out of the way to keep me safe from the big, bad Fire Prince." Her voice dropped. "My father would *never* do that."

"He was just trying to protect you," Katara assured her.

"I didn't ask to be protected," Xiu said firmly. "If he'd told me who they were, if he'd told me the Army *always* goes after firebenders with something new - well, we still would have had a fight. But I would have agreed with him. Mostly." She shook her head. "But he didn't tell me."

Sokka heard her pain, and winced. "He didn't trust you."

"You use your head." Xiu gave him a bittersweet smile. "Keep that up, and somebody's going to be

a very lucky girl someday. So for her and you - always tell her why you're going to do something, Sokka. Give her reasons. And listen if she's got facts that should make you think twice. Nobody agrees on everything. But if you really listen to each other... things should work out."

"Um... thanks?" Of course he listened to Suki. Well, he tried to listen. Even if maybe she had to throw him across the dojo a few times first-

Suki. Azula had Kyoshi Warrior outfits. Oh spirits - did she get Suki?

No way to know from here. If they could get to Full Moon Bay, somebody should know. The problem was going to be getting there-

Wait. She said something important. "What do you mean, always goes after?"

"Firebenders come up with new things," Xiu said simply. "Then they teach everyone else. That's what Sergeant Bo said, anyway. Usually it's something simple. A little different way to throw a fireball, maybe. But bending hot water?" She looked down at her hands. "I feel like this is my fault. At least some of it. Even if they didn't know about the healing... the Fire Nation wants him dead, and now the Earth Kingdom does too. Poor Lee."

"Poor Lee?" Katara said in disbelief. "Did you see what they did?"

"I saw." Xiu looked back at her, serious. "When I was a little girl, my father told me, *always* fight to stay alive. No matter what you have to do. No matter who says they're right, and you're wrong. *Always* fight. Because you might end up somewhere like Chin Village, where they still want to kill anyone from Kyoshi Island because of what the Avatar did to their *great leader*."

"Actually... we did," Sokka admitted uncomfortably. "So it's not just Avatar Day?"

"No." She eyed them all. "No offense, but how did you get out in one piece?"

"Don't ask me," Toph stuck in. "Happened before I got into the group."

Sokka felt the sand shiver a little under him, and read the hint clear as day. *Talk to me, guys. Or do I have to ask Zuko again?*

Never mind that Zuko was long gone. Toph would *find* a way. He just knew it.

"Well... some Fire Nation guys showed up, and... I did community service," Aang grinned. Glanced at Xiu dubiously. "They weren't really going to boil me. Right? I'm the Avatar."

Xiu *looked* at him.

"I mean, nobody would want to live with that Wheel of Justice craziness. Boiled in oil, eaten by sharks... even the Fire Nation doesn't do that to people, right?"

"No," Xiu said bluntly. "They usually don't." She shook her head. "That's why Dad told me, if it came down to Chin Village or Fire Nation troops? Head for the troops."

"You're joking," Katara said flatly.

"They boiled a fisherman who got blown off course last year," Xiu said bluntly. "Dad keeps up on the news that way. Just in case he ever gets a bunch of old buddies together in the right place."

"Violence isn't the answer," Aang said firmly. "Death never solves anything."

"It doesn't, huh?" Xiu gazed steadily back. "Keep reading."

Aang blinked, and went back to the pages. "I don't know what you think is in here, he's just talking about visiting the nuns at the Western Air Temple..." Aang paled.

Sokka held the pages as Aang's hands started shaking, and leaned in to read. "Oh, boy."

"Somebody want to fill me in?" Toph said impatiently.

"Short version? Sadao was telling the truth about Kyoshi slaughtering the Fire Nation," Sokka said soberly. "Yuan-ti's talking about 'smoke from numberless funeral pyres'. 'Islands vanished from the face of the sea'. 'Salt glittering on the flanks of Mount Shirotona, where the renegades tried to hold back the tide'." He eyed Aang. "Renegades?"

Wordless, Aang shook his head. "But... Kyoshi was the *Avatar*. She couldn't have..."

"She did," Xiu said, not without sympathy. "Fire Nation pirates killed one of her children. Granted, he was a grown man himself - but your kids are *always* your babies. Some other sources I read say she sent word to the lords first, before she brought the hurricane... but it looks like they went through the Earth King, and he remembered how Kyoshi humiliated *his* father, when she created the Dai Li."

"So the Earth King screwed with the messages," Sokka concluded.

"I don't know that for sure," Xiu said soberly. "But what Sergeant Bo had, what people wrote back then... I'd bet on it. He hated the Fire Nation, and he hated Kyoshi. Why not?" She eyed Aang. "Chin Village hates the Avatar because of what Kyoshi did to Chin. One man. Who deserved what he got." She pointed at the letter. "Go ahead. Tell me they deserved *that*."

I can't, Sokka realized. He knew how angry he was over Mom, and Yue. But... it had been firebenders, both times. People you could stop. People you could kill, and tell your dead it was *over*. Aang, in the Avatar State...

Fong, the sandbenders - we were lucky, Sokka knew. Nobody got killed. If things had been just a little different... you can't fight Aang when he's like that. No one can.

Except Azula. Who'd shot Aang in the back.

How did that even work? When Aang's like that, the spirits are with him; nothing else has ever touched him, even when people are bending all over the place-

Sokka glanced up at the sun, and swallowed hard.

When Aang came up out of the sea at the South Pole, nobody firebent at him. They were too stunned.

If they had... would it have gotten through?

Because Aang had told them Koh the Face-stealer still carried a grudge for something an Avatar had tried nine centuries ago. And if *Koh* could carry a grudge that long...

Oh man. This war is bigger than we think. A lot bigger.

"Maybe they didn't deserve it then," Katara said grimly. "But now? They have to be stopped."

"I know," Aang said thoughtfully. "But it does make a difference. If part of why things are so

messed up is they're hurting... we've got to fix it. Somehow."

"Fix them?" Katara shook herself. "What makes you think they want to be fixed?"

"Katara's got a point," Toph put in. "You better think about this, Aang. Hard."

"Nobody could want to be like that," Aang objected. "Kuzon wasn't like that. And Iroh-" He shook his head, sad. "He was *trying*."

"Stop big bad guy Fire Lord first, fix less bad guys later," Sokka suggested, before it could deteriorate into an argument. *Renegades on Mount Shiroto. Byakko?*

Maybe. But that didn't seem quite right. Especially with what was in the rest of the letter. "Aang? What's harmonious accord?"

"Huh? Oh. Grownup stuff," Aang shrugged. Winced a little. "Why?"

"Something Yuan-ti says about the nuns in the temple." Sokka frowned, re-reading it. "A lot of the bearing nuns... they had bears?"

Aang went a little pink. "He means they were pregnant."

"Pregnant nuns?" Toph said, disbelieving. "Is that even legal?"

"Well... where else would we come from?" Aang said, confused.

Xiu blinked. "All the airbenders were nuns?"

"Except for the monks," Aang grinned. "Yeah, he says some of them went down to see, and they were upset. Who wouldn't be?"

"He says more than that," Sokka frowned. *"Several of our younger sisters, especially among the bearing, were most distressed to witness the Avatar's will. I counseled the elders to bring all back into harmonious accord, as while mercy and compassion are tender illusions, they yet cause the spirit to remain attached to things of this world, and must all be pruned away. Else as you know yourself, one will desire more of what can only pass away and be forgotten. And how, then, would we know the transcendent joy of teaching our pupils freedom, if those who bear them will not give them up..."* Sokka gulped, lowering the letter with shaking hands. "Give them up? Your parents gave you away?"

"That's what they were supposed to do," Aang said, surprised. "We don't have parents, Sokka. Not like you do. Though Hakoda's kind of neat... weird, though. Kuzon was always worried about if his parents would be proud of him. And Uncle Kuroyama; he really cared about him, even when his uncle was yelling like you wouldn't believe... what's wrong?"

"Aang." Katara was wide-eyed. "You had to have a mother and father. Everyone does."

"Well, kind of... the monks went to see the nuns a couple times a year, and they brought back babies who were old enough," Aang shrugged. "Gyatso said boys got split between the North and South temples, and girls went to the temple they weren't born in... why is everybody *looking* at me like that?"

"Um," Sokka managed. "It's just... kind of surprising." *Make that terrifying. With some horrific slathered on top.*

"It is?" Aang frowned. "I told you Monk Gyatso looked after me. Zuko knew all about it. First day we met, he said I didn't know anything about fathers. And that's just not true. Gyatso took me to visit people all over the place. I know about fathers!" He shrugged. "Air Nomads just don't have any."

"Zuko studied Air Nomads to try and find you," Toph stated. "I guess most people don't anymore."

"...Oh." Aang looked downcast.

"You know what? We could use a snack," Sokka said firmly. "Injured warriors need to keep their strength up. We'll... go bring something back."

"Good idea," Katara nodded, shooting him a relieved smile that said she knew exactly what he was up to. "Aang? You want to tell me what it was like growing up with Gyatso? He sounds like a really good guy."

"Oh, was he *ever*..."

He'd been in a lot of close shaves since he met Aang, Sokka thought. But somehow, getting away from that pit of sand felt like the narrowest escape of all. "...Oh, *man*."

"Keep it together." Even Toph sounded dazed. "So now we know. I dunno what we do next, but we know."

"I was hoping he'd say it was wrong," Xiu said shakily. "I mean, I read it, but... one letter. It could have just been somebody's idea of a sick joke, or a crazy man, or..." She gulped. "But it's not. Is it."

"Twinkletoes didn't even flinch," Toph reported. "He... he thought that was *okay*."

Why does that scare me almost as much as the Fire Lord? Sokka wondered. And stiffened. "Oh, I am going to shove Boomerang up his- *that's* why Zuko wanted Dad to look after him!" He flung up his hands. "Oh, good going, jerkbender, dump the problems you can't fix on us-"

"You even listening to yourself?" Toph had a faint smile back, sarcastic confidence returning. "He tried, Sokka. Since he hit you guys at the South Pole, he's always told you why he was after you. His honor. His people. His family." She shrugged. "He can't fix this. He's not Aang's friend. We are. What else was he supposed to do?"

Sokka eyed her. "You know, sometimes I hate it when you make sense."

"You're his friends?" Xiu let out a low whistle. "You're braver than I am."

"Not feeling that brave right now, trust me," Sokka muttered. Sniffed the air, and headed for the nearest stewpot. People, blue tunics, no green, thank the spirits-

Dad.

He grabbed onto that solid strength, and never mind if it was manly or not. Dad was here, and real, and helping.

We're not in this alone.

"Sokka?" Hakoda gave him a concerned look.

"When you get a chance? Katara could really use a hug, too." Sokka swallowed. "Airbenders... aren't exactly what people think."

Hakoda nodded slowly. "Tell me."

He did, words running over each other, Toph and Xiu sticking a few in when he choked up. Trying to get across not just the bare words of the letter, but the casual way Aang had talked about shredding families apart. Like taking babies from their mothers didn't matter. Worse - that the moms were supposed to be *happy* about it.

He ran out of words. Gulped, and dug for a few more. "Aang... Katara and I kept telling him he was family. But he doesn't even know what that *is*. And if he doesn't know why we're fighting..." At a loss, Sokka shook his head.

"Maybe Iroh was right after all," Toph said, half to herself. "About how the war got started," she added, as heads turned her way. "He doesn't know for sure, he's guessing - but I think it's a pretty good guess."

"The war started when they wiped out the Air Temples," Bato pointed out.

"Yeah. But before that? The Fire Nation gets hit by hurricanes every year," Toph said soberly. "Not as bad as Kyoshi's, but bad. And the Air Nomads were supposed to warn them if they saw one coming. Only right before the war? They *didn't*."

Silence.

"Iroh thinks... maybe Fire Lord Sozin *made* that happen. So he'd have an excuse." Toph winced. "I couldn't believe they'd buy it. I know Aang. But... Aang's just one airbender, a kid, and..." She clenched small fists.

"And maybe the Fire Nation knew the others just enough to believe it," Xiu said, voice leaden. "Oh, Oma and Shu..."

Hakoda fixed his attention on Toph. "You seem to have talked to Iroh a lot."

"Yeah," Toph admitted, bracing herself. "So now I'm gonna take my lumps like a warrior ought to, Chief Hakoda. I didn't lie to you. But I *did* keep secrets."

A couple of the other men chuckled a little, and looked like they wanted to tell the little girl to scurry off. Sokka glared at them.

Hakoda kept his gaze on Toph. "What secrets?"

"I knew Zuko wasn't after Aang anymore."

Say whaaaat? Sokka almost yelped.

Hakoda considered her carefully. "You're Aang's friend, but that doesn't make you subject to our judgment."

"Yeah," Toph nodded, acknowledging the warning. "But I am Aang's friend, and Sokka and Katara's, too. So you need to know what I did to help them out. I am Toph Bei Fong, of the Bei Fong family, and when we make a deal? It's a *deal*. And you need to know what that means now, or we're all gonna end up in another mess."

"Well said," Bato approved. Glanced at Hakoda, a speaking brow raised.

"All right," Hakoda allowed. "How long have you known?"

"Since he woke up," Toph said bluntly. "Though, you know, him going after *Azula* to let us get away was kind of a clue." She shrugged. "We *did* make a deal. Like I told Sokka. But Zuko asked me to let you guys think he was still after Aang. He knew you were mixed up with the Army. And if they found out the Dragon of the West was here - well, you saw. So Sparky figured the best thing he could do was play target. 'Cause if you were worried about Zuko grabbing the Avatar, you *weren't* thinking about Iroh."

"He was really helping," Sokka said in disbelief. Sure, he'd figured out Zuko had shreds of a real person in there when it came to Iroh, but - whoa. "No games. No tricks. He was really trying to get Aang better." He flung up his hands, utterly confused. "Just because he promised you?"

"Because I asked," Toph said bluntly. "Like he asked me to help get Appa back. He stuck his neck out and found us, Sokka. When he *knew* we could bring the Dai Li down on them. 'Cause he knew Long Feng and the generals were setting up for another North Pole mess." She paused, frowning a little. "And... because he's got a plan."

Zuko has a plan? Oh man, that didn't sound good. "A plan for what?" Sokka asked, suspicious. "He can't bring Aang home. Azula's the heir. What else can he do?" *And why do I have this awful feeling I'm about to find out?*

"I don't know," Toph admitted. "Iroh never got a chance to tell me. He didn't want Katara trying to wreck it. But I think-" She hesitated. "You're not the only guys who ran into spirits."

Sokka felt his jaw drop. "Something tried to eat Amaya..."

"And Zuko helped the Dai Li stop it," Toph nodded soberly. "We talked, going to get Appa. A lot." She tilted her head toward Hakoda. "Zuko knows the world's out of whack. Iroh tried to save the *Moon*. I don't know what they're gonna do, but... it's not going to hurt us. And it might help."

"So despite everything, you still trust them," Hakoda concluded. "That's very honest."

"Well... not all the way," Toph admitted. "There's something else I know about Zuko." Her face turned fierce. "But that's private. Zuko's business. Nobody else's."

Thoughtfully, Hakoda nodded. "I think we can live with that."

Toph started. "You can?"

"You didn't lie," Hakoda said plainly. "You didn't tell all of the truth, but what you left out - well. I won't say I like it, that you claim Zuko as a friend..."

Toph glared.

"But if he has kept his word to you - I suppose that's all we can ask of the Fire Nation," Hakoda frowned. "Colonel Mohe has decided he'll be sending a messenger after all. If we want to avoid Ba Sing Se's answer, we should be gone not long after he is. Even if that puts us on the water after dark."

"What's wrong with sailing at night?" Sokka asked, confused.

"Nothing these past few days," Bato said practically. "But for weeks now... let's just say, I feel a bit bad about scaring your grandmother."

Toph stiffened almost as much as he did. "You've been seeing spirits?" Sokka demanded.

"We're not sure what we've been seeing," Hakoda admitted. "It started not long after the moon went dark. And it comes with a wind from the north..."

The Unagi is screaming, Lángxuě told himself, running into the teeth of the north wind. You should be running the other way.

Other way, heck; he shouldn't even be out here this close to sunset. That's what Sugi Village's elders had decided. That's what every other adult waterbender had decided, once they'd found the first tattered, noseless, earless corpse washed ashore. *Children* weren't supposed to go near the water alone. After dark, never.

If I wasn't alone, I wouldn't be going! Damn it, Sāoluàn...

Sometimes, he really hated being bad luck.

Not that anybody *said* that. Not outside of a few muscle-bound older boys he'd left frozen behind houses. And one or two of the girls who'd thought it was funny that a *boy* was trying to figure out his mother's katana, instead of the waterbender's longsword - before Sāoluàn had taken him under her... um, *arm*... and shown him a thing or two.

No. It was all in what the rest of the village *didn't* say, for years. After old Shanxuě had taken his family out to fish and only one half-grown waterbending grandson had washed up alive...

Waterbenders weren't supposed to be alone. Everyone knew that. So he'd been passed from house to house, every last one expecting him to eventually feel grateful, to feel like *family*-

But they weren't. They weren't Dad, or Mom, or Grandpa, or Little Sister. They *weren't*.

And only Sāoluàn never seemed surprised to blink herself awake and find him curled up in a corner, in her little shack in Hard Luck Cove. "Hey, little Captain," she'd stretch and yawn, "think we can find some breakfast before we spar?"

Damn it, when he found Sāoluàn - drunk, of course, she was *always* drunk after one of those idiotic fishermen's Pai Sho games - he was going to-

Don't say it. Don't even think it. You know what spirits can do with a death wish; you know what's loose out there...

-He was going to *yell* at her. A lot. And then wait until she woke up. And bang *pots* together.

Vengeance planned, he kept running.

Still be at the game, please still be at the game, Sāoluàn, be away from the water...

Well. She was. Almost.

He crested the hill to a serpent's scream and a crash of shattering wood, like ship-timbers shivering in a gale. Cove waves slapped pink in the wind, scattering and splintering the little boats of fishermen who lived and worked here, away from the main harbor and the shadow of Kyoshi's memory. Lapped up, sloshing toward the fish-stained shack that served as tavern, game-spot and home of the biggest fish stories on the island-

Red and white and blue-purple crashed down, the incredible length of an Unagi shattering the little

shack in a desperate bid to escape. A writhing crimson-blotched mass clung to the great serpent's neck, corpse-white head digging deep, blood trickling away.

Red and white and *huge*, Lángxuě realized, stunned. Too big to be real. Too greedily sucking blood to be anything else.

Jùréngzhì.

Just a story. Most of the time. Though everyone knew sometimes people died in the water... and *didn't* drown. And everyone knew the signs.

But it shouldn't *be* here, *no one* had offended the Ocean this much. No one could have! Even Suki leading the young Kyoshi Warriors into the war - that should have just upset spirits over there, not here...

Lángxuě stared at the writhing monsters, and wondered when the heavy sword on his back had turned into a laughable toothpick.

Please don't let that blood be hers. La, Tui, please...

Green caught a fading glimmer of sunset off the water, as a uniformed woman dragged a dazed fisherman from the wreckage.

Letting out an explosive breath of relief, Lángxuě bolted that way. He'd know that light-brown hair anywhere. Not the shade, not in this light - but the way its owner tossed it impatiently back, with no headband to hold it-

"Higher ground," he heard Sāoluàn swearing, fisherman draped across her shoulder. "Got to get to - whoa!"

He didn't look. Just turned and *yanked*, the Unagi's wild streams of water whipping away from his friend to coil in a pillar of ice between her and thrashing flesh.

The leech writhed, and ice splintered.

But he'd reached them now, bracing the fisherman's other side so they could all move faster. Well... trying to.

Damn it, I hate being short!

A problem Sāoluàn kept saying would fix itself - but he was *thirteen*. Shouldn't he be at least a *little* taller by now?

"Anyone else with you?" Sāoluàn still smelled of sake, but she didn't sound drunk. At all. Didn't sound like her normal, easygoing self either. This was the Sāoluàn almost no one else recognized; the Kyoshi Warrior, who faced him when they sparred. It made him want to stand straighter just to hear it.

That, or hide. If Sāoluàn was serious - this was *bad*.

"I don't think so," Lángxuě answered, trying to match her steady tone. Even if he had to take two steps to her one. "They finally stopped arguing, and now all the *grownup* benders are in a sweat lodge."

"They're what?" Sāoluàn sputtered, still dragging.

"Ritual purification to address the Ocean and divine the source of his wrath," Lángxuě said dryly. "If it goes wrong, they're probably going to blame it on me."

"Ritual purification," Sāoluàn repeated, deliberately ignoring any reference to his luck. "Address the spirits *properly*." Her voice had an edge. "Great. Great timing, guys..."

"Somebody has to!" Lángxuě protested, as they got above the surge line and sat their groaning burden down. "You *know* a *jùréngzhì* means the sea spirits are ticked off!"

"Anybody with eyes within two miles can see that." Sāoluàn stared at the struggling giants, her generous mouth an uncharacteristic hard line. "Why couldn't they just purify half the benders? And get the rest out here to *do* something?"

"That's not how it works!" Lángxuě argued. "You *know* the spirit-tales. The whole village has to do it, or it won't work. Even one person sneaking out..." He swallowed dryly.

"So we're screwed anyway, hmm, little Captain?" Sāoluàn smiled wryly. "Just my luck."

No, Lángxuě thought. *Not yours. Mine. I'm sorry...*

"Have to stop it," the fisherman groaned, reaching for a hook that wasn't there.

"Rhun, you're drunk," Sāoluàn scolded him.

Lángxuě couldn't help snorting.

"Well, I know *I'm* drunk," she said primly. "And I'm not concussed."

"*Have* to," Rhun insisted, as some of his braver and more nimble fellows swarmed in to help, pulling them all a bit higher above the surf. "Unagi's ours! Can't let some squishy blob eat it..."

"Damn it, the man's right," one of the graybeards growled. "Who's going to keep the Fire Navy out if that thing eats Unagi? Suki took all the real warriors off to the continent... er."

"Don't hold back, Chow," Sāoluàn chuckled, just a little bitter. "Tell me what you *really* think." Pale blue eyes narrowed, as the Unagi let out another whistling scream. "Damn, it's just as ugly as the last one. And bigger."

"The last one?" Lángxuě repeated, eyes wide.

"Ooooh, yeah," Sāoluàn gusted. "Oh, my little Captain... nobody ever told you why all the *real* warriors are Suki's age?" She grinned a little, and ruffled his black hair. "Nah, they wouldn't have. And you were hurting too bad to wonder. Nobody wanted to talk about what happened, six years back. That time, the wind was from the south..."

Wind from the south. The wind out of *nowhere*, that had shattered his family's ship, and driven the waves to a frothing hunger not all his father's waterbending could calm. Wind and waves he'd somehow ridden to shore, knowing something out there *wanted* him, he was just too small to see... "What happened?"

"Later," Sāoluàn said firmly. "Chow, we need nets. And harpoons. And fire-"

Leech jaws sank deeper, and the Unagi made a desperate lunge up the shore. But not far enough. The leech's blood-spotted white tail uncoiled, tree-thick, slapping water into a boiling fury-

The cove foamed, and a tsunami crashed down.

Ice. Use ice, float, grab the shore, don't let it suck you out-!

The teenager breached the surface with a gasp, ice a solid boat under him to ride the waves-
Shattered against rocks with a bone-jarring thump.

...Ow.

Waves retreated, dragging the weakening Unagi with them. And-

Lángxuě saw wet green, steel flashing, and felt his heart freeze.

"Come on, you bastard!" Sāoluàn taunted, desperately trying to get back to shore. Aware, by her glances, that half a dozen flailing fishermen had been sucked into the water with her; far easier targets, even if they were lighter without the armor awash in salt water. "Little brother wasn't enough to do the job? *Bite me!*"

Never touch the sea when the Ocean is angry, elders said. Never.

But he already had. And that was *Sāoluàn* out there.

If this works, you're only going to get one shot.

He took his stance. Gauged the angles. Fixed in his mind where splotched white was, and where steel flashed. And shoved fear back into a dark corner of his mind, to deal with later.

Fear lets sea-spirits get you. Get angry.

Another heartbeat to judge, and he leapt-

Landed, shoving *out* and *down*.

Sāoluàn's yelp had a distinct note of glee, as his wave swept her into shore. Bloodstained jaws tore free with the opposing wave, letting the Unagi squirm free-

Blind, those jaws swung toward him like a lodestone, hissing in fury.

Lángxuě ran for it, praying his wave would carry Sāoluàn in far enough. Praying he could outrun the tide soaking his sandals.

The leech howled like lost souls, and a boiling sea swept over him.

Damn it, if I'd just been faster...

He landed hard. On stone.

What the heck?

"Oh, my." An elderly face swam into view; upside down, but with long white mustaches that couldn't be mistaken for anything else. "So many visitors we are having, these days."

"What - how - where?" Bewildered, Lángxuě got to his knees, feeling the reassuring weight of steel on his back. And then reassuring arms, catching him in a familiar hug.

Mom. Dad.

...I guess I'm dead.

I can't be dead! Sāoluàn needs me, I have to-

"Hey there."

Sāoluàn's training took over; he flipped out of warm arms, landing poised, sword drawn and aimed at that deadly, crackling accent. "Get away from us!"

"Whoa. Whoa!" Empty hands, despite the red and black armor. A dark-haired topknot, caught back with a gold ornament Lángxuě didn't recognize, and a wry, friendly smile that didn't ever belong on a Fire Nation face. "Easy. We're all friends here." He chuckled. "Even if some of us haven't met in... a while."

Silent, Lángxuě turned the blade; the blatant threat Sāoluàn called *back off, or be sushi*.

"Perhaps this was a mistake," the elderly man in yellow and orange sighed.

"The mistake was made after Yangchen died," the firebender said practically. "Just because you don't like your people's past, Gyatso, doesn't mean you can run away from it." He winced. "I hate to do this to you, kid. But we're out of options... and the spirits have finally figured out we're running out of time." Serious gold met sea-green. "Hyourin - *wake up*."

The world reeled.

Hyourin. I'm...

I'm Lángxuě. But... I was Hyourin, and... "Kaze," Lángxuě breathed, lowering his blade. He didn't remember, not much - but he could feel. *Old friend. It's been so long. "What... why?"*

"Long story," the firebender said frankly, letting out a breath of relief. "Short version? We stopped them. Died doing it. But Koh squirmed free like the centipede-leech he is, and... things went wrong." He rolled his eyes. "And when the other spirits tried to fix it? They forgot one *tiny* detail." Kaze met his gaze soberly. "For over a thousand years, there haven't been any spirit-healers."

Oh. Oh, that... he could think of hundreds of Sāoluàn's curses, and only his parents' ears kept him from using them all. "Damn," Lángxuě breathed. No spirit-healers meant no one to patch the damage done when a spirit gifted a yāorén. Which meant anyone who blundered into the wounds and good heart needed to counterbalance the Avatar would have *maybe* a season's span before the strain tore them apart. Or less. "I'm screwed."

"Lángxuě," Dad reproved.

Mom thumped him lightly on the back of his head. "Our boy's headed for trouble. If a young man can't swear then, when can he?"

"You can make it. If you're fast," Kaze said honestly. "There are two, now. Maybe three, if Shirong learns fire fast... But you're going to have to find them. And they've got trouble like you wouldn't believe."

"Trouble?" Lángxuě said warily. Just because he couldn't remember what Kaze had dragged him into years past, didn't mean he couldn't figure out that sinking feeling of *oh brother*.

"Aim for Gaipan, and north," Kaze said, avoiding the question. "Trust me, you'll hear enough on the way to figure it out." He smiled sadly. "I really am sorry. If this works out, you'll help save my family. And..." He shook his head.

Sheathing his sword, Lángxuě hugged his parents tightly, drinking in the *feel* of them to hold until... oh, spirits, until. Took a deep breath, and looked up. *Gyatso's air. Kaze, fire. Mom and Dad, earth and water. Yeah, I see where this is going.*

And he didn't like it. Guides of the four nations meant an emergency, meant no other yāorén was there to gentle the first touch of another power on your spirit. Not that it was *ever* gentle...

A yāorén can fight what a bender can't. Even the Ocean's rage. "Get me back fast enough to fry that bastard before it eats Sāoluàn, and you don't have to be sorry for anything."

"That, would be the other thing I'm sorry about," Kaze winced again.

"Why?" Lángxuě said suspiciously. Kaze had taught a startled young waterbender fire, lives ago; just as Mi Noh had taught Kaze air. He could feel Agni waiting nearby; a glint of sunlight through temple windows, a breath of warmth across his cheek. Just as he could feel La in the fountain splashing rooms away...

And she was there, moonlight and flowing robes and a kind face he'd never seen before. *"My brother must yield his claim on you. It is the only way to convince the one who seeks you that we mean what our young yāorén promised Avatar Yangchen. That the balance will be restored, no matter the cost."*

Young yāorén? "You stuck some other poor bastard with this job?" Lángxuě blurted out. "What'd he ever do to you?"

La eyed him, face shadowed with gentle reproof.

"Sorry," Lángxuě said guiltily. "But - at least I can feel what it was like to have to hold the world together. If he's just started..."

"My cousin's ready for it. Trust me." Kaze's smile was proud. "It's going to drive him crazy... but he can do it."

"I hope so. For all of us." Lángxuě shook his head. *Not Agni. Oma and Shu are a pair, so- oh.*

Yeah. He *had* pleaded to be faster.

"My brother must yield you up," La repeated, determined. *"But you are still mine."*

The touch of her hand was snow and night and starlight.

When he could breathe again, the light had changed. Clearer, with the slant he knew meant autumn, though the mortal world was still edging into summer. La still glowed before him, but she was looking at the monk, eyes sad... and implacable as winter. *"The balance must be restored."*

"I raised Aang, and loved him, and did all I could to protect him from elders who saw only the Avatar, and not a boy," Gyatso said sadly. "And you would have me break his heart?"

"The rising tide must also fall. The calm must have the storm."

"I know that look in a man's eyes. Hyourin is a killer!"

"The wind cuts the mountain, and must be cut. How many did Kyoshi slay?"

"You cannot hold Aang responsible for-" Gyatso drew a breath, sidestepping the trap. "What you would do would unleash still more bloodshed. Not here, not now - but sooner or later, there would

be murder once more. Death the most honored Yangchen gave her life to stop!"

"If that's what you think we all died to stop," Kaze said levelly, "then you missed the whole point. Air is *freedom*."

Grim, Gyatso shook his head. "I have devoted my life to peace, and only one brief hour to war. I will not help you."

"Are you nuts?" Kaze sputtered. "This is why the Earth Kingdom *let* you get creamed, you-"

"If he won't help, he won't," Lángxuě said bluntly. "You're here."

"...Good point."

For the first time, Gyatso looked alarmed. "Your young prince needed four-"

"*Kaze is yāorén. Humans may have forgotten what that means. We have not.*" She turned toward the windows, and the endless blue sky. "*Autumn lord. Storm lord. You are welcome here-*"

Blue swept him away.

"Breathe, little Captain," Sāoluàn panted, dripping; knees weak, limbs like lead, listening for a heartbeat that just wasn't there. "Damn it, don't you die on me, I've had too damn many people die on me..."

She ignored the hissing behind her, the slosh of waves as a house-sized mass of flesh advanced. She'd barely had the strength to drag them both to the edge of the angry surf. She'd never be able to run now.

Focus. There was his heart, and there was his sternum, and - damn it, the stories said *sometimes* this worked...

Winding up, she thumped his chest. *Hard.*

A choking cough, and Lángxuě sucked in breath, sea-green blinking wide. "Sāoluàn... move!"

She smiled, bittersweet. Move, and let it have him instead? Too many of her war-sisters had already died that way. *Sorry, Captain. No.*

Cursing a blue streak, Lángxuě thrust his hand *out-*

Water chimed into ice, loud as frost-shattering bells.

Jaw dropped, Sāoluàn looked behind her. *Oh, my...*

The leech writhed in the midst of an iceberg, twitching ice into water an inch at a time. Caught, for now; but let it squirm even the tip of a tail free to boil the sea once more-

"Help me up," Lángxuě whispered.

Yeah, good idea, we should book it, Sāoluàn thought, pulling him to shaky feet. "Let's go-"

Lángxuě drew his sword.

"We need to *go*," Sāoluàn protested.

"They've forgotten," her little waterbender said grimly. "Everyone's forgotten. The longsword is water. The saber, earth. Paired swords are fire, steel for the dragons' claws. But the katana..."

He raised his blade, and Sāoluàn stumbled back.

"*Hai!*"

Winter wind struck like a sword, like a hammer; shattering ice and flesh and spirit-taint in one rush of glacial chill.

Blinking away frost, Sāoluàn caught him as he fell.

"Jaws," Lángxuě managed, weary as if he'd arm-wrestled the monster down. "Tell Chow... get the jaws. Break them. Burn them."

"I'll tell him," she nodded, hand on his as he gripped steel like grim death. "I'll handle it. You rest." *Oh spirits, kid. If that was - what I think - oh, Oma and Shu, you are in so much trouble.*

Sea-green narrowed at her, and one hand came up to grab her uniform. "Don't you ever give up again. Hear me? Not *ever*."

"I won't," she promised. Trying not to shiver, as ice spread through soaked armor.

"Good," he muttered, finally relaxing into her hold. "Gotta look after each other. Big sister..."

Out like a light. Breathing deep, Sāoluàn sheathed his icy sword. Scooped up the little waterbender, and headed for Chow.

Fishermen scattered out of her path like sparrow-keets.

Chow was made of sterner stuff. A bit. But then, Chow was one of the few people who realized she was never quite as drunk as she looked. "You heard him," Sāoluàn said bluntly. "Break and burn the jaws. If Ocean's decided we've paid enough, it'll be over. If he doesn't - you should have some breathing space before a new leech can get big enough to start munching again."

"We should?" Chow said warily.

Sāoluàn snorted. "You think the Fire Prince would have ever showed up here if people didn't talk? He can't stay. The island can't risk it." She eyed him. "And I'm not going to stand by and watch while the village blames him for surviving. *Again*."

Chow at least had the decency to look guilty with his relief. "You can't take him from..."

"From who?" Sāoluàn said angrily. "Damn it, Chow! Everybody sees a waterbender. Nobody sees a *kid*. He has to haunt a washed-up Warrior's shack just to get someplace to cry!" She shook her head, feeling Lángxuě breathe against her breast. "We're going."

"Where?"

Sāoluàn grinned, thinking of the short list of things she'd have to pack. Including one Pai Sho set... and the rumors of the Grand Lotus that had come with the last game. "Now that's... a secret!"

I hate secrets, Mai thought, almost scowling. Brush-maker Tu might be tall and lean where General Iroh was short and... not. But otherwise? There was something about him all too familiar. "I can't wait that long for delivery."

"Our normal sources of supply have been... upset," Tu said regretfully. "A few more days might clarify many things."

"I don't think anything from outside the city would be of high enough quality to justify the wait," Mai said levelly. *I don't care if you are the general's contact. He won't be coming back here. Not when Azula has whole Army divisions to call on for backup. He'll wait until she leaves the city. And Min won't last that long.*

She didn't know what Azula had done after she left. But given Min was now in a metal cell, Azula looked smug, and Ty Lee was biting her fingernails - it couldn't be good.

Damn you, Zuko. And damn Iroh for getting to you. Covering the Avatar's escape wasn't worth your life!

"Ah, I see," Tu sighed. "The lady is a connoisseur... hmm. Perhaps something less on the cutting edge of fashion, and more classic? I have some valuable antiques."

Mai tried not to roll her eyes, looking over sets of matched hair ornaments and brushes; all fit for a formal Earth Kingdom poetry competition, in which the presentation of the writer was as important to victory as the poem itself. Ty Lee might have enjoyed dressing up like a Kyoshi Warrior, but she preferred her own hairstyle...

Wait. What did he just say?

Looking over jade-tipped ornaments again, she made her choice. "I'll take this one."

Walking into the city night, Mai almost shuddered at how normal the streets seemed. *Odashu didn't give up this easily*, she thought, nodding to a soldier on komodo-rhino back as she passed through the palace gates. *They fought. And when they couldn't fight anymore, they fell back. Brave. Sane.*

These people... Long Feng beat half the life out of them before we ever got here.

The shadow of a wry smile flickered over her lips. She could hate Azula for using her. She definitely hated the princess for arranging Zuko's death.

But damned if the princess wasn't a true heir of Sozin's line.

Destroy your enemies. And from the ashes, build our nation stronger than ever.

After all, wasn't that what she meant to do herself? Azula wasn't the only one who could recognize the Dai Li's deadly skill. Min wanted it to defend his city, his family. A worthy and honorable goal. But if all the hints she'd gathered were accurate, his family meant to leave Ba Sing Se for Jinhai's sake. And if his loyalty to them was stronger than his ties to the city, then maybe...

Azula brought the walls down. You paid for that in blood. Take it, and burn free!

A brave hope. And a foolhardy one. But she clung to it anyway. Anything less would paralyze her with the knowledge she meant to *defy Azula*...

Better dead than caught. No doubt of it.

Min is already caught. I will not let this stand.

Face coolly disinterested, Mai descended into the dungeons.

The pair of Dai Li blocking the way were no surprise. "Why do you want to visit the prisoner?"

"He helped me avoid disgracing myself when I wasn't feeling well," Mai said levelly. "I thought I'd return the favor." She swept a cold gaze over them. "Unless you want him biting through his own veins before Princess Azula decides she's done with him?"

They were too well trained to flinch. But the one on the left looked... a little less than certain. "Has that happened?"

"Around the princess? Not yet, as far as I know," Mai said candidly. "It used to be a problem for the Fire Lord, before he gave the prison wardens strict orders." She shrugged slightly, letting her surety in her uncle's tales speak for itself. "She's the Fire Lord's heir. I'm sure more people will realize what that means now."

They searched her. She'd expected that, and handed over her obvious knives without more protest than a silent snarl. The less obvious ones she'd left in her quarters, even if it did make her feel half-dressed. No sense provoking a more intimate search.

Still a little pale, they opened the door.

Agni, he looks so small.

Steel clanged shut behind her, and Min finally looked up. Green eyes went wide with shock, followed hard by anger, and fear-

Mai let him cling to her, chains chiming with every shiver. "Breathe," she whispered. "Just breathe."

Shuddering gasps, and Min bent his head against her shoulder, breathing in something other than his own fear. "My family - she said-"

"She doesn't have them," Mai said levelly. "I know her. You'd know by now if she did." *Because she couldn't resist showing you to each other. Before she started with the fire.*

"She said - they're loyal to General Iroh, she's going to kill them..."

A chill ran down Mai's spine. "Tell me what she said. Exactly."

"She said-" Min shivered, obviously fighting past terror to think. "She said she couldn't take me, because I had someone else's strength. My parents. That they had to be loyal to the general, I don't understand..."

"Fire feeds fire," Mai stated. "Your spirit is tied to your parents. Your clan. We're stronger together than separated. Strongest of all, loyal to a great name." Strength she no longer had to draw on... but it didn't matter. She wouldn't let it.

Zuko lasted through three years of exile. I can do this. I have to.

"If you can face her and not crumble, and you don't even know what you're doing... it'd take a strong firebender to lend you that strength," Mai went on. "The Dragon of the West could do it. Not many others."

"She said I was old enough to head a clan," Min blurted out.

Mai froze. *No. She wouldn't.*

"How can anyone want that as... they're just kids, they never did *anything*, and-" Min shuddered. "She said she'd leave me *alive*. With just her to..." He shook his head, wordless with horror.

"No wonder Ty Lee's upset," Mai murmured, mind racing. Granted, a concussion could make the most iron control slip. But Azula wouldn't indulge in something this vicious without a reason.

A whole host of reasons. Including the Earth King.

Taking the city was good, but nothing matched having the city's ruler in chains for the Fire Lord to grind under his heel. More, the very fact Kuei had escaped meant there was still a viable threat to the Fire Nation lurking in this city. That was Azula's real target. Kuei would just be a bonus.

Destroy an incipient rebellion, capture the Earth King, and crush Shirong, Mai calculated. All she has to do is panic someone enough to try to rescue Min, and she has them all...

Mai swallowed hard, realization seeping into her veins like ice water. *And if no one tries... she has us all anyway.*

Azula had set the scene. Deliberately used her fire and her cruelty to deliver a threat no clan could ignore. All of Min's spirit must be screaming for help-

Yet only a very, very few people would know why that help *must not come*.

She knows. Agni, I don't know how she knows - but she knows.

"Mai?" Min touched the side of her face, worry for her beating back even the terror, for a little while. "Are you all right?"

"The Dai Li are good," Mai whispered. "I never saw anyone following me." *Agni, by now they have Tu-*

No. No, they wouldn't have picked him up yet. Not when he'd as much as said some of his more talented contacts would need a few days to show up. Azula wouldn't be satisfied with just Mai and one subversive shopkeeper. She'd want the whole network. Gift-wrapped, to make the victory she presented to the Fire Lord full and complete. *Perfect*. As that mess at Omashu... hadn't been.

Naive, maybe. But Min wasn't stupid. He added her words up, and paled.

But then he looked down, and breathed. Not the linking of air and chi and muscle she'd seen in firebenders, a hair's breadth from leaping into battle. This was slower, deliberate; chi rooted through spine and feet to sink into the very earth's heart.

Min raised his head, green frightened, but holding steady. "Never give up without a fight."

"So I hear," Mai said deliberately. Reached into her hair, to pull out the one ornament not pinning any black locks into place. Twisted the lacquered stick to part along an invisible line, and poured a gray coil of diamond-wire into his hands.

Min's jaw dropped. He glanced up at her, a thousand questions springing to his lips... and dying, unspoken.

Mai smiled wryly. Of course the Dai Li had searched her for bits of earth and stone. Of course

they'd seen the jade subtly topping her ornaments. And of course they'd search again, on the way out, even if the amount of stone was so small you'd need to be the Avatar's own earthbending teacher to be dangerous with it. But all of it would be there when she left... and they'd only be able to report one more opportunity for treason passed blithely by.

Just subtle bits of jade. Just enough to shimmer in an earthbender's senses as stone... and hide the knife-dust of diamond on wire. Wire that could cut through even the best steel, given time.

"Never give up," Mai agreed. "I'll be back."

I don't know what I'll do, not yet. But I'll be back.

Mind deliberately elsewhere as the Dai Li searched her again, Mai considered her next move. And allowed herself one brief instant of self-pity. If there was ever a time she could have used one retired, tea-drinking, kooky general...

Agni and friendship had let her take back her loyalty and survive. The rest was up to her.

First, find out what Ty Lee knows, Mai decided. She thinks that Water Tribe boy is cute, of all things. I know she can't hate Min enough to let Azula do... that.

Not that Ty Lee would want to go against Azula. But sometimes you could do a lot, by not doing anything.

Ty Lee, then Quan, Mai thought. To see if Azula had broken him... or if he still had the guts to try the impossible.

I am a child of fire. Impossible just means no one's done it yet.

Head high, Mai walked.

"Impossible," Captain Jee muttered under his breath, staring at the map of Ba Sing Se's environs spread across the wardroom table.

Not quiet enough, Teruko winced, seeing the prince's gaze flick past Sadao to her captain. Sometime she'd have to admit to Jee just why a marine like herself slept with a pillow over her head. People were a lot louder than they realized.

Jee caught the glance, and grimaced. "We can't fit three thousand people on this ship. We'd be lucky to pack in a third of them! Add in the supplies we'll need - we won't have a better chance to seize them later, General, I don't care how many contacts you have. I may be just a saltwater idiot who wouldn't know which end of a potato-choke to plant facing up, but I know logistics. My wife-" His voice barely caught. "The Home Guard is involved in establishing new colonies, too. Even if everything goes right, if your report on the area does mean arable land and we can draw enough farmers to feed those of us who aren't - the first crops *always* take time. And as soon as people realize we're really trying to do what the prince has proposed... well, we could be under siege from all directions. Meaning we need to put in more labor on fortifications, and less on feeding everyone. We need to pack this ship with everything we can get our hands on, or those we do get out won't last the first winter."

"All true," Iroh allowed. "Patience, Captain. When we first made our plans, *Suzuran's* capabilities were not among them." He eyed his nephew. And waited.

Studying the map, Zuko picked up a scrap of discarded notes. "This would be our plans." He let it quiver in the palm of his hand. "This would be our plans with Azula there."

Even half expecting it, Teruko flinched when it burst into flames.

"I think we can still use some of what we came up with," the prince went on, brushing the ash away. "The problem is that once people start moving, we'd have to get them all out at once. Another commander might let groups slip away without a citywide crackdown, but as long as Azula's there..." He frowned, thinking.

Jee sighed, and looked pointedly at the general.

Who smiled, and shook his head slightly. "You forget, Captain. Azula knows I am alive. And she has studied my tactical manuals most thoroughly. She will expect me to act against her, and she will anticipate plans I may make." Iroh paused. "But she believes my nephew is dead."

Teruko blinked. *Good point.* Tactical geniuses could do that, she'd heard; read the opposing commander's mind across the battlefield from the smallest of clues. Move and countermove until somebody guessed wrong, and then-

"We need to do something stupid," the prince muttered.

Jee eyed him, gray brows lowered like thunderclouds.

"You don't know my sister," Zuko said honestly. "She has to be perfect. Everything has to be under control, all the time. *Her* control. She wants the best around her. So if we're going to dock at Ba Sing Se, where people are going to see us, but not have her *see* us, we need to look..."

"Incompetent?" Jee said dryly.

"Marginal," Zuko said firmly. "Incompetent makes us target practice. We have to look like *Suzuran's* record. A bunch of rejects, just managing to pull off the mission. And it's going to be worst for you, Captain. We have to assume she knows who was on the *Wani*."

Teruko shook her head, still trying to catch up. "You want us to go in right in plain sight?"

"Nobody deserts and lives," Zuko said wryly. "Everyone knows that." He swept pale gold across them all. "Why not? Shirong's a rogue Dai Li; what better prisoner to bring back for the Fire Lord? We don't try to take everyone, we take the people who can't make it overland. The ones we're going to *need* with us. We take the supplies we need; if we're heading west with prisoners, of *course* we're going to stock up so we can head back to the Fire Lord without stopping. Just another loyal ship in the service. Delivering critical, need-to-know information about the channels we used to get to Ba Sing Se without getting hit by mines... and the last reported location of the Water Tribe fleet."

Somebody's still mad about almost getting squashed, Teruko smirked to herself. Well, good. The rest of the fleet near Chameleon Bay would be reporting where they'd dropped out of communications, and *someone* would spot Hakoda's fleet eventually. Better to report it first, and look virtuously innocent.

Fingers interlaced with absent nervousness, Sadao looked at their captain. "Sir?"

"It could work," Jee said thoughtfully. "Jeong Jeong, a scant few others... but no Fire Navy ship has ever deserted. Technically we haven't either, not that the princess will care for details..."

"It will work for a time," Iroh corrected. "Azula will soon realize something is not right."

"Maybe we want her to." The prince took a steadying breath. "Don't plan to deceive the enemy based on what you want them to think. Plan on what you want them to *do*. Right? We've got plans to get people out of Ba Sing Se, but they won't work if Azula's there." He met his uncle's gaze. "So what if she finds out I'm alive?"

"Risky," Iroh murmured. "We must think on this."

"Ah, sirs? There's something else we've got to think about," Sadao offered. "If we set up a domain outside the Fire Lord's loyalty - won't that violate Avatar Kyoshi's decree?"

Teruko blanched. Even Byakko gave the Fire Lord loyalty, much as Lady Kotone had to grit her teeth to do it. The consequences otherwise, in the luck of the world ranked against them...

"In point of fact," Iroh mused, "it will not."

All eyes fixed on him. Teruko felt the room hold its breath.

"By Kyoshi's own words, an exile is beyond the Fire Lord's authority." Iroh's gentle smile reminded Teruko far too much of Shidan's. Just before he cut someone apart. "She never said an exile could *not* hold a domain."

Yeah. Definitely a lot of dragon on that side of the family, Teruko thought. Damn it all, no wonder the prince was such a mess. Grandma Tatsuki said half of knowing your family tree was making sure you didn't end up with *too much* dragon in the family. Stories said dragon-children married humans. That they were *supposed* to. And if Lady Ursa hadn't...

Fix mess later, Teruko told herself. *Planning now.*

And part of those plans meant unobtrusively following the prince back to the visiting officers' quarters after they hashed out the first attempts at assaulting Ba Sing Se. And waiting for him to admit he noticed her.

It took following him right into his cabin before he cracked. "Lieutenant..."

"Sorry, sir," Teruko said politely. "You're going to be stuck with me."

"You have marines to look after."

"Sergeant Kyo will handle that," Teruko said levelly. "Sir. In case you hadn't noticed, you are *not* expendable."

"My uncle-"

"May have been listed as a traitor but is *not* an exile," Teruko said bluntly. "If he rules the domain - a domain that won't answer to the Fire Lord, that *can't* - we walk right into the teeth of Kyoshi's vengeance. You've been up against an Avatar since *winter*, sir. You know what that means." She grinned wryly. "You're probably driving Agni to drink just keeping you alive."

The young prince ran that logic through in his mind, and deflated. "Damn it."

"Sorry, sir," Teruko said ruefully. And meant it. Nobody ought to get stuck with a mess like this.

But he's a great name. This is what they're trained for. What they're born for.

"I've lived without luck all my life," Zuko said, half to himself. "I forget sometimes... most people don't."

"Get some sleep, sir," Teruko advised. "Things always look better in the morning."

"Not always," the prince muttered, laying a few folded documents on a writing tray. "Go ahead, Lieutenant. I'll turn in when I'm done."

Oh, sure you will... One of the written phrases caught her eye, and Teruko swallowed hard. *So testified to by I who have met the spirit of the dead...* "Sir. Is that what I think it is?"

"It's all I can do."

"Sir?" Teruko asked warily. That *pain* in his voice; anger and grief and an awful understanding...

"Have you ever screwed up?" the prince said, almost soundless. "I mean, really screwed up. So bad that-" He cut himself off.

This is serious. "A couple times," Teruko said honestly. "Remind me to tell you why a dozen taverns won't let me set foot inside."

"I *wish* I'd just burned the place down."

Teruko's eyes narrowed. *Okay, this is very bad.* "You weren't gone an hour, and you didn't even kill anyone," the marine protested. "Sir, what could you have possibly done?"

"I told Katara exactly how much she hated us for killing her mother," Zuko said bleakly. "And then... what she'd get to see the rest of the world do to us, once Azula took over." The scarred side of his face bent into a bitter, bitter smirk. "Find your enemy's weak spot, and hit it with everything you've got. She's a *waterbender*. She needs to believe her tribe *loves* her. And I just set her pretty little family portrait on fire."

Teenage kid, Teruko told herself. *He couldn't possibly have hit anybody that hard, that bad, in just a few minutes-*

Teenage dragon-child. Who'd been chasing this particular witch of a waterbender half a year. Who'd been raised by the Dragon of the West, who was legendary for devastating opponents before they even got *near* a battlefield.

Damn. He could have.

"And I don't know what's worse," the prince went on; still bitter, full of loathing. "If I didn't do it on purpose - Agni, no one should trust me. How can you trust a great name who draws steel without cause? And if I *did*..." He gripped the bridge of his nose, and let out a shuddering sigh.

"Uncle keeps telling me I'm not like him. But he's my *father*. I've watched him for years. I've seen how he handles the court. All the subtle words, the glances, the smile that means someone's dead, they just haven't stopped breathing yet..." He let go, turning half away. "Like stabbing one leopard-shark in a school. If they attacked her, they wouldn't be attacking us."

"Oh," Teruko said, very quietly. "Well. I don't think we have to worry about your judgment, sir. If you didn't do it on purpose, you've got damn good instincts."

"But I-"

"Sir," Teruko interrupted. *Cut that off right now!* "To win without fighting is the highest victory."

You turned the most dangerous opponent still standing into a liability for our enemies. You acted *correctly*." And if your uncle says otherwise, he and I are going to have a talk.

...Right after I get the idiot to tell you you're a dragon-child. Agni, nobody sane expects diplomacy out of you!

"I attacked the Avatar's waterbending teacher," Zuko shot back. "You think he's going to forget that?"

"Sir..." Teruko sighed. "He's the *Avatar*. We're Fire Nation. He's not going to treat us honorably. No matter what." She shrugged. "You were the commander on the ground. You made the call. If that's what you thought you had to do to get us out in one piece - I trust you, sir."

Which left him as dried-out speechless as Captain Jee had, giving loyalty. Damn it.

Fire Lord Ozai's an idiot. Argh.

"Though I'm kind of curious how you knew that would work," Teruko admitted. "The Water Tribes are a tight bunch. They should have gone after *you*, not her."

"That's the worst part," Zuko said bitterly. "That's why I have to, it's not *fair*... You were there. When her brother spoke against her. To *us*." Pale gold glittered at her. "Sokka attacked her, Lieutenant. I know what she did - but he's her *brother*. She's Water Tribe, she's a *waterbender*, and her family is *hurting* her for something that... wasn't all her fault. I know she hates us, but - Aang doesn't like people getting hurt, and Katara knows that. If she'd been doing it on purpose, she'd have gotten him out of there *before* she tried to kill us."

Made sense. Kind of. "Family. For the Water Tribes, that's a lot like clan?" Teruko ventured, digging into what she'd heard about trade with the Foggy Swamp.

"We're loyalty and power. They're family and community. But close," Zuko nodded. "She was the *only* waterbender in the tribe."

Teruko thought about that, and what it would have been like to be the only firebender in a village of people who didn't bend. Who couldn't feel why you had to be up to greet the dawn, why you hated the ghost hours of the night, why you could stare into flickering flames for hours and never, never get enough...

Zuko saw her shudder, and smiled bitterly. "I'd hate to have her life. My father might think I'm worthless, but at least he *saw* me. The failure. The hopeless firebender. The child he didn't want as heir to Sozin's legacy... and damn it, he was *right*."

"Sir," Teruko started to protest, alarmed.

"He was," Zuko said simply. "I don't want to conquer the world. Azula does." He breathed out, lantern flickering behind him. "He hated me, but he *saw* me. Chief Hakoda... he just saw his perfect little daughter, who couldn't ever hate *anyone*." Zuko winced. "Spirits. She must feel like she's drowning, every day..."

Teruko looked at him askance. "She *did* try to kill us, sir."

"I know," the prince said guiltily. "I know this isn't a spirit-tale, Lieutenant. She's not the evil sorcerer's beautiful daughter who wants to get stolen away to another world, far from all the monsters her father creates. She's Katara of the Southern Water Tribe, and if she thought I *ever* felt sorry for her, she'd try to rip out my heart and make me eat it."

Way, way *too much* dragon in there, Teruko thought ruefully.

"But she's also the Avatar's ally," Zuko said soberly. "And I just shoved in his face a part of her he never wanted to see. Either he's going to ignore it, like he ignores *everything* he doesn't want to deal with... or he's going to follow Sokka's lead." His fists clenched. "She's fought the whole world for that idiot! And he'd throw that away because - oh, how *horrible* - she actually *hates her enemies*."

Teruko thought that over, and nodded. "So... you think she was trying to be honorable. By Water Tribe standards."

"I'm not saying she's trustworthy," Zuko grumbled. "Just - she deserves better than I think she's going to get." He spread empty hands. "I can't fix that. But I thought, at least..." He trailed off, frustrated.

"You could show her respect," Teruko finished.

"It's not even that." The prince paced the few steps the room allowed. "It's... water and fire are different, but they're not separate. If Katara wants revenge on the whole Fire Nation, that's her problem. But if she wants *justice*..."

Teruko blinked, a delighted grin slowly spreading over her face. "That's right. General Iroh says the Avatar's supposed to keep a balance between the nations? You're going to rub his *nose* in it."

"Um..."

Teruko grinned wider. *Shidan? Is going to love you. Count on it.* "How can we help?"

Quiet, Katara thought, huddled on herself on the other side of the ship from where Aang splashed with Appa in the water, throwing back ripples of the early morning light. She should be keeping an eye on him. He wasn't healed yet. But Sokka was there to watch him. Along with most of her father's crew. Deliberately not watching her.

You could almost think you were alone.

Not that she'd be so lucky. Spirits; lost in an ice-field with Sokka hadn't felt this alone....

Wonder how Xiu's doing.

Xiu wouldn't be alone. The weaver had said something about idiot boyfriends, and sticking with Sergeant Bo for a while until somebody got sense knocked into them. Katara hadn't really been listening. Too busy slurping down stew and avoiding Aang's attempts to tell her how really, really cool it was not to have parents, 'cause all the monks looked after you....

Xiu had brought her the bowl. The weaver had taken Zuko's side, she wasn't a *friend*....

But Sokka had brought back food for Aang. Not her.

Xiu had brought her stew, and waited until Aang was distracted to lean in close. "Run," she'd whispered.

Mute, Katara had stared.

"I've seen the way he looks at you," Xiu said quietly. "He's twelve, and he's the Avatar, and spirits

help us all, we know what an Avatar can do if he wants. And you're Water Tribe. You'd never give your children up." She leaned in close, voice quiet as a heartbeat. *"Run."*

I can't leave Aang, Katara thought; now, as then. *The world needs him. And... he needs me.*

But if he needed her, why was she alone?

Hesitant feet slid and stumbled along the deck, and Toph tumbled into her. "I *hate* wood."

"You'd probably love a Fire Nation ship," Katara muttered under her breath.

"Yeah, I would," Toph admitted, ears sharp as ever. "Metal. I could *see*. I hate being blind." She shuddered a little, gripping Katara's hand hard before she remembered, winced, and eased up. "Sorry."

Wood in the middle of water. There's nothing here she can bend besides her own bracers. "It's okay," Katara said, trying to drag herself out of that cold pit of *alone*. "You can hang onto me."

"And who are you gonna hang onto?" Toph grumbled. "Say the word, and we ditch the guys to clean up their *own* mess."

She couldn't have heard that right. "What?"

"You, me, over the side, ride some ice back to shore, and take off," Toph said bluntly. "You say Aang knows waterbending, and *he* thinks he knows earthbending - no way do we have to stick around where we're not wanted." Blind green eyes aimed her general direction. "I didn't know. I *should* have; Zuko said what you guys do with icebergs. I just... I never thought anybody'd want to do it to *you*. What I felt back there - what they said..." Pale, she clung to Katara's arm.

"Toph, I-" Katara swallowed. "I'm fine, don't worry about it-"

"Don't lie to me."

Sometimes she forgot Toph was only twelve. "I will be fine," Katara said softly. *I have to be.* Aang needed her father's fleet, and the world needed Aang, and... she'd do what she had to. Always.

"No you won't," Toph gulped, still clinging to her. "They *hurt* you. And I just let them, 'cause I couldn't fix it. Your dad had already decided. Like my dad did." She shook her head, voice quiet enough no one a foot farther away could have heard her. "All I could do was wait until Sokka hit him with that bit about Aang. Then he'd listen enough to think I was on his side-"

"You lied to my dad?" Katara hissed. And she'd thought things couldn't get any worse.

"No!" Toph looked indignant. "I told him I'd take my lumps for keeping Zuko's secret. If he thinks that means I agree with him, that's his problem."

The world tilted a little. "You... but Aang said..."

"Like I should listen to Aang about being angry?" Toph said impatiently. "After he almost flattened those sandbenders, *and* us, for losing Appa?" She waved a frustrated hand. "What, he's the only guy in the world who gets to blow things up bending when he gets mad?"

Katara shook her head, heart heavy. "But... this was *making* people feel..."

"Did you mean to?" Toph said seriously. "Listen, okay? I'm not saying, did you want Zuko dead. I kind of want to hurt a few people right now, too. But did you try to make everybody break the

truce?"

Katara's gaze fell on Toph's hands; small, and still a little gritty with sand. And obviously feeling her pulse. "I... don't think so..."

"Then it's not your fault," Toph said seriously. "Your bending blew up on you. Just like that knot blew up on Zuko."

Katara saw red. "What?"

"Listen!" Toph wasn't letting go. "Katara, please!"

Please. From Toph. "If you think I'm going to believe that- he hurt *Bato*-"

"He was trying not to hit us!"

Alone had been washed away in one sweet rush of fury; Katara held onto the earthbender, feeling waves slap against the hull. "Oh, this had better be good," she ground out. "Why bend lightning if you *don't* want to kill someone?"

"It wasn't his! It's what's stuck in Aang."

Katara blinked. Replayed Toph's words in her head. Still didn't make sense. "...What?"

"I've felt Azula bend lightning," Toph said bluntly. "And I felt what Zuko did to throw it right back at her in Ba Sing Se. Azula - it's like part of the *world* splits apart. All the hairs on my toes stand up. Then she brings those fingers together and *bam*." Toph took a breath. "Zuko didn't do that. It was... it's crazy, but it *felt* like your water whip. He caught it and held it and his heart was so *scared* - he tried to put it somewhere else. Only there wasn't anywhere. He *tried*." She winced. "When he let me feel what he was doing, before everything blew up? I could kind of *see* what he was bending. That knot in Aang is big, and it's ugly, and Zuko was trying to look at it and *not* go near it, all at once." She shook her head. "I guess he slipped."

"*Slipped?*" Katara sputtered.

"It's not your fault Bato got hurt," Toph went on, determined. "You, Zuko - you're both trying to fix what Azula did. Only she's just too scary-good at hurting people." She blew out a breath, wipping away stray black hairs. "And it's not your fault Aang got hit, either."

"How can you say that?" Katara whispered, aching. *I wanted to fight her. I wanted to kill her. I wanted to show the whole Fire Nation what a real waterbender could do.* "If I hadn't been fighting Azula-"

"She was *trying to kill you*," Toph said stubbornly. "You think that doesn't happen in some rumbles? Fight managers figure those guys out quick, sure; crowds don't pay to see dead benders. But if you get caught in the ring with them first? You do what you *gotta*." She snorted. "Aang got zapped because Azula zapped him. End of story. And I'm not going to blame Aang for getting zapped. Much. She's scary-good with that lightning." The earthbender paused. "But running out on you in the middle of the fight? He broke your deal. You don't *do* that."

"I don't have a - a *deal* with Aang!" Katara burst out.

"Oh yes you do. We all do. Just because it's not inked down and signed, doesn't mean it's not real." Toph looked serious. "He's the Avatar. The guy the spirits say has to save the world. And we're the ones helping him do it. We're his teachers. How are we supposed to hold up our end of the deal if

he won't listen?"

Katara shook away the doubt. "Airbenders don't kill-"

"Firebenders do," Toph said bluntly. "And earthbenders. And *waterbenders*. Is he a waterbending master or not?"

"We can't ask him to give up what he is!" Katara insisted. "He's the last Air Nomad. It'd be like - like making you spend the rest of your life on this ship!"

"So we should let him shove us all off a cliff?" Toph shot back. "I don't know about you, Katara, but me? *I can't fly.*"

Can I? Katara wondered. *I did it once, but... even in the sky, we went to war. When Sokka dropped that engine into the gas... how many people died then?*

And it was Sokka who saved us. Aang knocking the tanks down... it bought time, but until a lot of them died...

Toph blew out a sigh. "I'm not saying Aang should be like me. I'm the greatest earthbender in the *world*. Too much awesome? Could *break* something."

Caught off guard, Katara giggled.

"I'm saying, you went into that fight thinking Aang was going to back you up no matter what," Toph said bluntly. "'Cause she's Azula, and she's the bad guy, and the Avatar's supposed to stop the bad guys." She paused. "And then he didn't. And that *wasn't fair.*"

Katara looked away. "Some things just aren't fair."

"Friends are supposed to be." Toph leaned a little closer. "I mean it, Katara. You, me, over the side and *gone.*"

Leave her family? Leave Aang? For a friend, Toph had a funny way of showing it-

"Ack!" Sokka almost splashed over the side. "We got company!"

Scarlet feathers knifed through the air.

"A hawk," Katara muttered, getting to her feet as it perched on the side of the ship not far from them. "Now what does he want?"

Sokka beat her to it. "Jerkbenders - did enough already - whoa. Toph? It's for you."

Katara almost slapped herself in the forehead. "That has to be Zuko."

"Looks like it's in parts... why are these bits folded together? And how do they get paper this thin, anyway? It's like onion-leek skin, only it doesn't break... here."

Toph tucked away the folded pieces. "Any day now, Snoozles."

A splash and a swoosh, and an air-dried Aang was almost on top of them. "Why are they sending us a message now?"

"You'll find out when I do, okay?" Toph said impatiently. "Sokka-"

"Right, right." Sokka cleared his throat. "To the honorable Lady Bei Fong, by this my hand, greetings - sheesh, can't this guy just say hi? Oh, this looks better. Whoever's reading this to Toph-" He stopped, eyes narrowing. "No. No way."

"Keep reading, Sokka," Toph said pointedly.

"No." Sokka started folding, glaring at the hawk. "He's just being a jerk again. We don't need to hear this-"

"Give me my letter."

The last time Katara had heard Toph that mad, Aang had just blasted her out of the ring. Which, Katara realized with a shock, really hadn't been fair; Toph had been waiting for earth to bend, and Aang had blasted her with air she *couldn't see*.

Like she couldn't see now.

Stepping in with one fluid move, Katara snatched the letter before Sokka could hand it off to Aang. Glared at them both, and retreated, pressing thin folded sheets into Toph's hand. "Here."

"Read it."

Katara grimaced. The last thing she wanted to do was deal with Zuko, even just his letter. But for Toph... "Whoever's reading this to Toph-"

-hand it over to Katara. Now.

Toph, sorry for using your letter as a cover. I'm counting on your ears to make sure this gets to your friend without interference.

Katara of the Southern Water Tribe,

I am sorry.

I have been informed that "bastard" is an informal, if still serious, insult in your culture. In the Fire Nation, especially to a great name, it is far more dire. It implies that your mother has been disloyal to her husband. This is a threat to the stability of his clan, hers, and that of the blood father of the child. Such threats lead to war.

You attacked my mother. I attacked yours. Viciously, ruthlessly, and without remorse. A great name does not endure threats. He ends them.

But on further thought, away from your angry mob with spears, I realize I may have misread your intent, your reasons, and your desperation. You defied your father, your chief, to attack me. From what I know of the Water Tribes, that is extremely serious, even if you are a waterbender. And Toph, who has been an honorable opponent and temporary ally, calls you her friend. Which implies that whatever I may think, you are not an idiot, and you acted with full knowledge of the consequences.

I have tried to consider what those reasons may be. I am probably wrong; I was not born in your tribe, and though I have listened to Uncle and learned what I could from Amaya, that can only be glimpses of what it is like to live among your people. But I have tried to think this through, and I will outline my thoughts.

If nothing else, this should at least give you great insult fodder for next time.

First - that you believe I and my people are a threat to your tribe.

Correct. I am - every firebender is - trained to kill. We are lethal; we pride ourselves on it. I may have avoided the war, but as your fleet knows, I have not avoided defending myself with deadly force. You had every right to believe me dangerous. Particularly since I, and Captain Jee, went to some lengths to mislead you as to our lack of loyalty to Fire Lord Ozai. You had only our word that we meant no harm... and I have seen enough of the colonies to know there are those who shame their uniform and our people by believing other nations are less than us, and unworthy of honorable behavior.

If this is a reason, I can only say to you that I intend to rescue some of my people from the war. I have no intent to threaten your tribe to do so. But none of us knows what the spirits will arrange next.

Second - that you believe I am a threat to Aang.

Again, correct. Aang scares me down to my bones. Not because of his power (by now you have had a look at the bending I grew up facing), but because he is an idiot.

One thing I can always count on with Azula is that she is smart. Ruthless, vicious, and generally trying to kill me, but smart. Her actions are weighed, calculated, and targeted for maximum effect on her prey. Azula can kill one flutter-hornet in the midst of a swarm, if it suits her purposes.

Aang would blow the whole swarm away from a picnic through a wall, knocking down everything in the house including the lanterns, and cheerfully fly away while a whole neighborhood burns down behind him.

Amaya tells me Aang was completely unaware of the haima-jiao that ate at least two dozen people before the Dai Li brought it down. The Avatar was oblivious to a malevolent spirit murdering innocent people. Those things are fed by death. Particularly violent, unjust, spiritually-touched death - and guess what's being borne on the currents southward, from thousands of unhallowed bodies with no funeral pyre?

If standing in the way of that is a threat to Aang - yes. I am.

Third - that you want vengeance for your mother, and you believed the truce was preventing you from that.

I would never prevent you from taking proper vengeance for your mother.

Let me specifically define proper vengeance, in the Fire Nation. Bluntly, it does not include me, Uncle Iroh, or anyone else currently on Suzuran. We did not do it.

...Yes, I have checked everyone's service records to be sure. Outside of my original crew, no one here has even been near the South Pole. Or wanted to. It's cold down there.

That stipulated, vendetta is an honored and honorable tradition among my people. Once murder has been testified to and confirmed by a great name, a man does not rest under the same sky as his father's killer, nor a woman as her mother's. You have every right to seek out those who dealt the blow, hunt them down, and end them.

That would be the ideal. The reality will be trickier, given the current status of war between our peoples. I have consulted with Uncle and Captain Jee, who are more familiar with the technicalities. It is tradition that a certain amount of trickery and misdirection is acceptable and allowed in vendetta. Therefore, note the enclosed documents. One has your grievance under your

correct name, and ours; keep it safe. The other notes you as Tomoe of the colonies near Gaipan. That you may show openly, anywhere in the Fire Nation or its territories. If pressed, claim it is a sword-name, taken to avoid discord with your clan while you hunt. That should satisfy most authorities. It is no guarantee of safe passage; you'll have to rely on your own wits for that. But it is a legal, binding document, and it makes your vengeance lawful.

This is not a gift. This is not a favor. This is your right and duty as the child of a murdered mother - and my obligation, as a great name who knows of injustice.

And there, of course, is the trap.

...Of course there's a trap. We're enemies. I know that, even if I hope we may be honorable ones.

You want to invade the Fire Nation, so Aang can fight the Fire Lord. These documents won't make even an idiot blockade commander let an army through... but a small strike force could enter, disguised as your retinue. Or a scouting party; given how little information I know you have on the Fire Nation, intelligence on your enemies would be a very good idea. There is no time limit on vendetta. So long as your target still breathes, you can search the whole damn nation looking for him.

Aang is not going to want to do this.

Aang was raised by monks. I have studied the airbenders' teachings. (Don't look so surprised. Know your enemy.) They don't believe in vengeance. They don't believe in killing. This works a lot better when you can fly away from all your problems. When you can't - you've seen the Southern Air Temple. So have I.

Aang will not want to do this. Even though it's the smart thing to do. The honorable and just thing to do.

But then, my people's argument with the Avatar has always been about justice.

So. I have threatened your tribe again, by offering you vendetta in the place of a tribeswoman's vengeance against all the Fire Nation. I have threatened Aang again, defying his ideal of peace to present your cry for justice. I may have even threatened the memory of your mother, for now you know you have a choice in how you avenge her. Or not.

Now you can hate me.

-Zuko, son of Ursa, and Fire Lord Ozai.

Folding the letter with numb hands, Katara looked up to silence.

"How could he?" Gray eyes were wide and horrified. "How could he do that to you? Revenge is a two-headed scorpion-viper; all it does is poison you! You have to forgive, and let it go-"

"Let it go?" Paper crumpled, before she pressed it into Toph's grip. She could feel the sea surging around her. "Let *him* go?"

"The past is gone. You have to let it flow away," Aang insisted. "Guru Pathik says love is never destroyed. It's always reborn as new love. How can you want to take someone's *life*, when what you lost will always return to you?"

The world grayed.

My mother. My mother is gone forever.

And Zuko understood that. A firebender, Ozai's own blood, her worst enemy in the world-

Knew there *wasn't* any forgiveness. Just blood, so the dead and her own pain could finally be at rest.

"I don't know you," Katara whispered. "I don't know you at all."

Water roared with her heartbeat, and she felt Toph's fingers desperately brush hers-

And fell forever.

Chapter End Notes

"It is better to be hated for what you are, than loved for what you are not." - André Gide.

Lángxuě (Snow Wolf); Sāoluàn (bedlam, disorder, havoc, roughhouse, TEMPEST).

...I just know someone has recognized who those two are based on. Heh.

jùréngzhì = giant leech; I gave it a Chinese name, but this is an actual monster out of Cherokee folklore. Though I've fiddled with it a little.

What Sāoluàn uses is called the "precordial thump". Just in case anyone's wondering, *do not do this* without advanced medical training. (Check Wikipedia for more details.) Sometimes, it works.

General note on pinyin: I use 'em when I can find 'em. Until recently, I didn't have a good source that displayed them accurately. Now I seem to have found one, at

[www .mandarintools worddict. html](http://www.mandarintools.com/worddict.html)

On Katara: someone that badly hurt, that stuck in old childhood patterns, takes time to fix. Time, and a nonjudgmental ear - which Aang, the Water Tribe fleet, and Sokka (much as I love the sarcastic one) are not. They've only been out of Ba Sing Se a few days, and Toph has just been putting together how bad the situation is. Give her a little time to work.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"All right." Teruko waited until Corporal Shoni stepped away from the now-sealed hatch, and turned her attention back to her steadiest squad. "People, we have an... interesting situation."

Steady as a rock, Sergeant Kyo barely raised a gray-touched brow. Private Sukekuni had a mink-deer in torchlight look that probably meant he was thinking through three different scenarios of what she'd say next. Shoni looked bland, but then the lean knife expert always looked bland. Especially when he was about to kill someone. Corporal Moriaki looked perturbed, but intrigued, much as the field-healer had ever since Prince Zuko's first demonstration. Private Fushi looked gleefully manic; not an unusual state for the squad's only other female firebender. And Private Rikiya-

"Ooo, bunking with the prince," her favorite troublemaker grinned. "Good thing we know you're flexible- ow!"

Amazing, how Kyo could do that without even seeming to move. "Bad joke," he said sternly. "Commanding officer, remember?"

"Sorry..."

And he looked it, for once. *As well he should*, Teruko thought. Hit on part of your own unit? That was *horrible* for discipline. *And* morale. Great names and officers knew better. And Prince Zuko was *both*.

"Juvenile insinuations aside, I believe he may have a bit of a point," Moriaki offered. "I'm certain the general taught him discipline, but he is a young man, and, well..."

"First off, no one is bunking *with* Prince Zuko," Teruko said bluntly. "It's not safe." *Especially not with the temper he's in. Well, probably in. Nobody burns that many rough drafts and walks away happy afterward.*

She still didn't know whether to snicker or sigh at that overflowing pile of ashes by the prince's desk. She'd read a few of the letters for him, as had General Iroh, and Captain Jee, and anybody else who couldn't move fast enough. Both the general and the captain had been surprisingly patient, pointing out a choice of word here, advising a switch of paragraphs there. Frankly, Teruko couldn't see much of a difference... but she'd been taught how to write reports, not court documents. She'd read the final letter and *felt* it hit, and she wasn't even Water Tribe.

From the way General Iroh had smirked, it'd hit the Water Tribe fleet *worse*.

Serves them right.

Putting that thought aside, Teruko looked straight at Kyo. "I haven't gotten much history out of the general yet." *Have to fix that. As soon as we get some breathing room.* "But from what I've seen? Someone's tried to kill him in his sleep before."

Kyo nodded slightly. "And General Iroh's not in the same room now. He'll be twitchy." He paused. "Still."

"I need you riding herd on everyone," Teruko said plainly. "Moriaki, you'd keep him up nights with healing questions-"

"Sad, but true," Moriaki said ruefully.

"Shoni, you like snarking with Rikiya a little too much-"

The knife-thrower tried to look innocent.

"Sukekuni... no offense, but he'd run right over you..."

"He would," the younger marine admitted. "Boss, I couldn't catch the prince on my best day," he said at Kyo's doubtful look. "Back on the *Wani*? I tried. We had people in tears. Captain Jee finally had to sit us all down with... um, something non-regulation... and tell everybody they weren't responsible for where the - er, young man was." Sukekuni shook his head, wide-eyed at the memory. "I swear, he could evaporate through a steel bulkhead."

"And Rikiya..." Teruko groaned. "Ten minutes alone while he's thinking, and you'd haul out a deck of cards."

"Keeps the mind sharp," Rikiya said virtuously. "Keeps the nerves flexible-"

"Depending on how bad a day he was having, it'd take him... oh, maybe five seconds to figure out what's *on* those cards," Teruko said dryly. "And then he'd fry them. And, probably, you."

"No!" Rikiya looked close to shock. "They're *artwork*!"

"They really are good," Fushi nodded, gold eyes glinting with laughter. "Real high-quality work."

Capital city girl, Teruko reminded herself, eying the deck of less-than-clothed beauties cradled in Rikiya's protective grip. Byakko was old-fashioned, and everybody knew it.

"I can't *believe* you'd say he'd fry my... wait a minute," Rikiya said suspiciously. "He's *sixteen*. Why would he fry my cards?"

"Because he doesn't have a territory yet," Teruko said simply.

"Huh?" Rikiya blinked at her, completely confused.

"He's not sixteen the way you were at sixteen," Teruko stated. *And still are, you loose-living menace*. "I don't usually do this around people who aren't my clan... anybody here have steel they don't like much?"

"Here," Shoni said levelly, producing a knife from nowhere.

Taking it, Teruko spread one hand on the fold-away table. And stabbed down.

The screech set her teeth on edge.

Handing back the nicked blade, Teruko turned her hand so everyone could see the barely scratched nail. "Grandpa Subotai was a dragon-child," she said levelly. "Trust me. Prince Zuko is at *least* four years too young for you to corrupt."

For once, Rikiya was speechless.

"Wow," Fushi breathed. "You never said you could... But then, you wouldn't. Because the

government says- whoa. If it was your grandfather, then everybody... That must have been hard, growing up."

"Or was it?" Sergeant Kyo murmured.

Teruko eyed him.

He gave her that sardonic look of, *someone has to teach you young lieutenants we oldsters know stuff*. "Let's just say, I've seen something like that before." He straightened. "So what do we need to know, Lieutenant?"

Oh great. I'm supposed to be an expert? "Mostly, what you saw on the steamer," Teruko said bluntly. "When he's not in combat... dragon-children still have problems, but they can handle it. When he is, and he gets mad or scared enough - don't bother yelling. All he'll hear is noise. He's focused on protecting the clan, and killing the enemy." She frowned, dragging Shidan's old lessons back to mind. "Use hand-signals. Drag him if you have to. Anything that's not words." She swept her gaze over them. "That shouldn't happen often. The general didn't know the prince was word-lost. My guess? He's never been lost long enough for people to think he was more than just a hardheaded teenager who won't listen. He must have a lot of practice dragging himself back after the first flash is over. This time... it just took longer."

"Because being buried alive doesn't upset someone at all," Shoni said dryly.

Teruko tried not to roll her eyes. As she'd said, there was a reason Shoni was *not* sticking close to the prince. "Other than that? He's a firebender. Don't lie to him. Don't sneak up on him. And don't be afraid of him. Fear means *prey*. That idiot airbender flinches too much."

All eyes went to Sukekuni.

"Well, he is scary!" Sukekuni said defensively. "He dragged us into a *hurricane* after the Avatar... Okay, forget the hurricane. The Fire Lords have been looking for the Avatar for a *hundred years*. And the prince *found* him. And - a dragon-child, and you saw what he did with the water... We're in the middle of a spirit-tale, Lieutenant. And that's *not* a good place to be."

Damn. Sukekuni had a point. *Think, think...*

"It is if you're the good guys," Fushi grinned. "Cheer up! When it comes to scaring off bad spirits? Dragon-children are even better than Fire Sages!"

Hiding a sigh, Teruko looked at Sergeant Kyo. Everybody knew Fushi kept her head buried in the wildest books, but usually somebody reined her in before she got this far...

Kyo looked back. Utterly serious.

Oh, monkey-feathers. "Okay," Teruko sighed. "What don't I know?"

"Sir?" Lieutenant Sadao's voice was almost as quiet as his knock. "We think it's back."

Zuko grimaced, and rolled out of his bunk, missing the feel of warm feathers against his hands. It wasn't safe to stable Asahi in human-sized quarters, and it wasn't proper for him to be down in the beast-lodgings with her. Damn propriety.

Already dressed, he slipped out through the hatch-

Stopped, almost nose-to-throat-guard with a certain annoyed marine.

Backing up a step, Zuko sighed. "Lieutenant Teruko. If we're after what I think we are, an amphibious invasion is not going to help."

"Not. Expendable." Gold eyes glittered behind her faceplate. "Sir."

He felt a headache coming on, and the *Agni-it's-dark* hour had nothing to do with it. "Stay behind me."

"Sir-"

"How many kamuiy have you gone after?" Zuko asked levelly.

"...One less than I will have after tonight, sir." But she inclined her head, and got out of his way.

Best I can hope for right now. He eyed Sadao. "Where?"

"That's the tricky part, sir..."

I don't like it down here, Zuko thought darkly, stepping soundlessly off metal rungs onto the steel of the lower deck.

Which only made sense. A brig wasn't supposed to be pleasant.

A few steps behind, Teruko was almost as quiet. Armor did make stealth a little harder; one reason he was in just robes and trousers-

"At least the traitor's not in uniform," a voice snarled above the general rumble of discontent.

...And that would be the other.

"Shut it, Koki." Sergeant Aoi approached the bars of his cell, all solid muscles and a scowl dug deep as the Great Divide. "Well? Anything to say for yourself, betraying your commanding officer? Your own honored father?"

"Be quiet and let me listen," Zuko said evenly. "Unless you like sharing your quarters with something you can't see."

"Ha!" Koki crowed. "You expect us to believe that, you-"

Footsteps, thumping on the deck down the far end of the hallway. When the prisoners knew as well as Zuko did that *no one* could have gone that way without being seen.

At least, no one human.

Breathing deep, Zuko ghosted past suddenly silent cells. Paused. Listened, and *felt*, for that odd prickling unease of something not bound to mortal flesh and bone.

There. I think.

"If you hear something come past me, burn it," Zuko said quietly. Squared his shoulders, and took a few more steps forward. "What are you, and what do you want?"

Footsteps paused, taken aback. Stomped, like a big man thrusting out his chest before a brawl.

Zuko snorted. "Does the name *haima-jiao* mean anything to you?"

Stomping crashed to a halt. The deck made the slightest of noises, like an amateur cat burglar trying to sneak clear.

It works with fire. Let's see how it does with water. Flowing liquid from his waterskin over a handful of dried leaf bits, Zuko snapped a water whip down the hall-

There!

Wet leaves pressed for a moment against something that wasn't water. Zuko eased his grip on the water still in his hand, shifted his weight in one half-step as he turned palms up and pushed and pulled at once-

Steal Polar Bear's Fur.

...If a waterbender really had used this move to snatch fur from a bear's breast to cure her husband, he had no idea how the North had *ever* made their women stop fighting.

Leaf-speckled water wrapped air like a winding sheet, and froze.

Teruko whistled. "Is that a pair of boots?"

Zuko tilted his head, trying to catch the angles of light and water around empty air in ice. It did look a little like boots. But if there weren't any real boots there, what the heck was it? "*Betobeto?*" he sputtered.

How did I even know-?

Worry about that later. Spirit to deal with now.

"The whole ship's been spooked by something *harmless?*" Teruko snarled.

"They're not all harmless," Zuko corrected grimly. *Maybe it's just Lee. Though I kind of wish Amaya had warned me there'd be stuff on kamuiy in my head...* "Some of them like to panic people off cliffs at night. Or spook people in with the blasting jelly." He glared at the shape caught in ice. "You wouldn't be one of those. *Would you?*"

Under leaf-bits, something seemed to shrink.

"You, are getting *off my ship.*"

Listening, Zuko heard the tiniest tiptoe-shuffles on ice, like an abashed child.

Great. Now I feel like a bully... A thought hit, and Zuko smirked. "You know, if you really are harmless, I know somebody who'd *love* to play with you."

A pitter-patter perked up.

"Oh, you wouldn't," Teruko choked out.

"Why not?" Zuko asked innocently. "He's the bridge between our world and the spirits. Let him see what that really means. *Without* a spirit that can tear whole fleets to shreds." He turned back to the trapped kamuiy. "If I write a note of introduction you can take to Aang, will you leave us and *Suzuran* alone after I give it to you?"

Excited tapping, and a stomp, like a soldier coming to parade rest.

"Agreed, then," Zuko nodded, melting ice with a downward push, calling water back, and catching leaf-bits as they filtered through his fingers.

Invisible once more, the *betobeto* tap-danced across the deck, and faded out of hearing.

"You? Are *evil*," Teruko snickered.

"Thanks. I think," Zuko muttered. Walked back past the occupied cells, and stopped in front of Aoi's. "Sergeant. Captain Jee tells me you are a good and honorable man, truly loyal to Fire Lord Ozai."

The muscular sergeant had drawn back from the bars, eyes wide in dread. "What *are* you?"

Like I'd tell you. "It's not a good idea to make the Moon mad," Zuko said levelly. "Admiral Zhao tried to kill the Moon Spirit, and almost succeeded. He tried to kill La, Sergeant. *Agni's sister.*" Zuko let out a slow breath. "General Iroh tried to stop him. But all we could do was try to set things right. And that wasn't fast enough for the fleet. When you report to my father, warn him the spirits are taking a *direct* interest in this war. I don't know if the Avatar will be able to do something like that again, but someone had better talk to the Fire Sages and find out."

Aoi's eyes narrowed. "You betrayed the Fire Lord for the Avatar."

Keep calm. Remember the plan. "I'm sure they'd both like to think that," Zuko said dryly. "No. I broke my loyalty to my father to serve our people." He drew a breath. "And to protect my sister. She *is* the heir, now. If she... doesn't have to hate me, doesn't have to prove anymore that she's of Sozin's true line, no matter how young she is... maybe she can become a good leader for our people." He let his voice drop. "Agni, I hope so."

"She tried to kill you, sir," Teruko said bluntly.

Zuko snorted. "She's always had our father's permission for that." He eyed Aoi, watching that swiftly concealed shock. "I want you to report to the Fire Lord, Sergeant. I want you to tell him everything. Our people are in grave danger. I can't save them, not on a battlefield. But there's something I can do. And I will." He let himself smirk. "There are more ways to destroy a man than fighting."

"You healed the Avatar!" Aoi flung the accusation at him.

"The alternatives were *worse*," Zuko snarled back. "Kill him? The Water Tribe and the Avatar's little gang would have slaughtered us all - and where would the next Avatar be born, Sergeant? Do *you* want to try to attack the North Pole? Again? I have information from reliable sources that if they train an Avatar, they won't stop until we're *all dead.*" *Breathe. Hold your temper. Keep talking.* "Not heal him? If Azula had just burned him, that might have been an option. But she hit him with *lightning*, and the Southern waterbender made sure he survived. Ask the Fire Sages what happens to people after that. The only thing worse than a live Avatar is an *insane* one."

About to protest, Aoi stopped. Scowled, looking him over once again.

"The Avatar is deadly, but he hates fighting," Zuko said levelly. "If the Fire Nation withdrew to our original borders, he might be persuaded to prevent further reprisals. *Might* be," Zuko emphasized, before the sergeant could do more than roll his eyes. "That's a matter for the war council to take up. I'm only asking you to report it as a potential option." He paused, and sighed. "And in your report, emphasize that I am an exile and a traitor. By Avatar Kyoshi's own decree, any action I take

can be disavowed by the Fire Nation. And I *will* act."

Aoi was eyeing him, ignoring whispers from the other cells. "How?"

Zuko grinned wryly, heart racing. *Pull it off. Pull it off, you're not lying...* "Sergeant. So far I've dragged him out of the North Pole, damaged his alliance with his bending masters, and left the Water Tribe fleet with an *extremely* awkward situation to explain to their Earth Kingdom allies. That thunder you heard the other day? General Gang is now *off* the roster. Permanently." Deliberately, he shrugged. "And now I'm going to drop a *betobeto* on his head. Do you *really* want to know what I'm going to do to him next?"

Agni, let me out of here!

Leaving the brig behind, Zuko climbed out into free air, drinking in the brackish scent of waters well inland from Chameleon Bay. Should be some good fishing up here, even if it was too early in the year for a salmon-bass run...

I don't want to do that again. Ever.

"Lying hurts," Teruko said sympathetically, joining him near *Suzuran's* prow. "Even when you're not really lying."

"I never knew how she did it," Zuko said, half to himself. "Azula lies all the time, like it's *easy*, like..." He listened to familiar footsteps approaching, and scowled. "Spirits, why doesn't she just *marry* him? They've got so much in common. It'd solve *all* our problems."

Iroh sighed, lantern lighting his serious expression even as it cast shadows into red on Lieutenant Sadao's armor. "Nephew. You know that is not fair to Aang."

Zuko tried not to let his fingers curl, recognizing his own simmering temper, the desperate need to tear *something* apart. "Isn't it? He lies whenever he feels like it, he *never* has to work for what he gets--"

"Perhaps I should say, it is not fair to Azula," Iroh said dryly, ignoring the way Sadao choked behind him. "Yes, she has been given much. But she also puts in ferocious effort, and demands everything of herself. Much as you do," he inclined his head. "And yes, Aang is too swift to bend the truth when it suits him. Still, I think he does not do so out of malice--"

"A lie is a lie!" Zuko burst out. *And I hate them! I hate them all.*

Teruko cleared her throat. "You're not going to budge him on this one, General."

"No?" Iroh arched a brow, curious.

"No," Teruko said firmly, eyeing both Iroh and Sadao sternly. "There's a reason Lady Kotone handles diplomacy for Byakko. Shidan *hurts* liars." She gave Zuko a look of wry approval. "Even bluffing like that must have been nasty."

Zuko blinked, anger fading in the face of that honesty. *She gets it. She's... not like Mom. But she gets it.* "It had to be done."

"It did," Iroh acknowledged. "But I will consider that for future plans. One does not go against one's nature lightly."

And that meant something, Zuko could see it in the way the three of them glanced at each other.

Later, he told himself, squashing any further impulse to whine about Aang, Azula, and the world just not being fair. Life wasn't fair, definitely not for him, and it wasn't going to get any *more* fair just by snarling about it. Better to just... do something. "You think this will help? It's not like he cares what happens to me."

...Okay, maybe a little whine. Damn it, that *hurt*.

You've known it for years. Just... let it go.

"He will care that Azula failed to kill you," Iroh said grimly. "And whatever else my brother will think, he knows you do not lie well. He must at least consider our message." He nodded to himself. "Hesitation. Confusion. Those, we may gain by this night's work. Above all else, we need *time*."

"What we need is a miracle," Zuko grumbled. "If Aang would just sit down and think..."

"Nephew?" Iroh arched a brow.

So simple. I'm an idiot. "What does Aang want?" Zuko blurted out.

The lieutenants looked at him like he was a few flames shy of a furnace. "He's the Avatar, sir," Sadao pointed out. "I kind of think he wants to kick our ass."

"That's what the *Avatar* wants," Zuko said bluntly. "I've fought the Avatar, Lieutenant. And I've fought Aang. They're *not* the same."

Armored feet shifted. "Sir," Teruko said plainly, "I know he looks like a cute kid..."

Iroh held up a hand. "Appearances deceive, yes. But it may not be as simple as it seems." He frowned, thoughtful. "I have sources on Avatars past, that refer to the awesome power of the Avatar State. Yet those sources claim it takes time, and discipline, and mastery of all four elements before an Avatar can control such power. I had thought the texts were wrong. We have seen Aang unleash that power. Yet if it is akin to bending... perhaps he has *not* mastered it. Perhaps it masters him."

"Toph said he hates what happened at the North Pole," Zuko said quietly. "That he... didn't know that would happen." He raked them with a look. "So. He's the Avatar. He's also a twelve-year-old Air Nomad *idiot*. How do we get that to listen?"

"You might begin by admitting he is not *entirely* a fool," Iroh said mildly. "He has eluded the Fire Nation, which is not easy; he remained out of your grasp, which was harder still. He has chosen wisely in his friends. Toph is a treasure, Sokka simply needs more experience and training, and Katara... well. We are all wounded, in our way. It does not make her less dangerous." He eyed his nephew. "You were raised from birth to know your duties as a great name, and trained to meet them. He was a child of air, born to freedom. Being the Avatar, chained to the very fate of the world, must be a terrible burden."

Zuko flushed, and briefly considered banging his head against the steel deck. It'd be less frustrating. "Can't you tell me these things *before* I ruin everything?"

"Prince Zuko." His uncle's gaze held mild reproof. "He *is* twelve. He was not ready to listen, not then. I do not know if he is ready now, or if he will *ever* be ready. Leaving was wise. Telling him the truth, was wise. You have not ruined *everything*." He paused, and chuckled. "You may have done better than any of us could have imagined. What better gift to a heartsick child, than a new friend?"

"More snow," Asiavik directed. Aang gulped, and froze more seawater into white slush. Lifted it with a shove of hands and will, helping Momo and the healer pack it into the canoe resting in the bottom of the ship, fresh white darkening around Katara's feverish body.

Sokka watched, one hand gripping Toph's, and felt utterly, totally helpless.

Beside Asiavik, Hakoda looked like grim death. "They swore it wasn't contagious."

"The firebender was freezing," Asiavik said dryly. "She's burning up. Even if they were contagious, this is a different sickness."

"Maybe not," Toph said quietly.

Sokka tensed. "Hold on, they lied to us? Why those-"

"They didn't lie!" Toph burst out. "Stop *saying* they lied when they said something nobody wanted to hear, they didn't-!"

"Toph." Rising from Katara's side, Hakoda rested a hand on the earthbender's shoulder. "I know you're frightened. But if you know anything that might help Katara... we're listening."

Toph bit her lip, obviously listening Aang's way.

Aang looked at her, and Katara, and swallowed hard. "I'll go," he said quietly. "I'll just... go over to one of the other ships with Appa. If you don't want me to hear."

"No!" Toph said quickly. "It's just... this is hard, Aang. You think you know what Kyoshi did, and you don't. And it's - it's awful."

Aang winced. "She killed a lot of the Fire Nation. I get it. I don't want to think an Avatar could do that, it must have been a mistake, but-"

"That's *not* the worst part."

"What's worse than death?" Asiavik snorted.

Sokka shivered, remembering a deserted town, and angry daggers of flame. "When someone finds what you love, and takes it away," he said numbly. "What'd Kyoshi take from them?"

Toph let out a slow breath. "Water's family, right? Family, and the tribe."

"So the elders say," Hakoda nodded.

"And you're her family, and Aang's her family," Toph said, feeling her way as obviously as if her toes were scraping wood. "And Katara had to choose. And she couldn't. She's burning up. Like... like her water's dying."

Aang recoiled. "You mean this is my fault?"

"No, it's not," Sokka started.

"Yeah, it kind of is," Toph said levelly. "You heard the letter. The Water Tribes *need* revenge. Zuko was trying to make things right so she could have it."

"But revenge is wrong!" Aang protested. "How could he do something so awful?"

Awful. Revenge. Sokka tried to connect the two words in his head. It didn't work. Sure, Aang didn't want to hurt people... but what did *want* have to do with it? Some things just had to be done.

"Awful?" Asiavik said in disbelief. "You won't shed blood to quiet your own dead, and you think we're awful? Listen, young brat-"

"Asiavik," Hakoda said firmly. "Let the boy be. He is an Air Nomad. If he says his people will rest without bloodshed, I believe him."

"Strange people," the healer muttered, feeling Katara's forehead again.

"Aang," Hakoda went on. "Our elders' stories say your people were very different from ours. You say the ways of the Air Nomads were never to kill, and I understand. I don't agree - be patient, wait," he added, as Aang's mouth turned stubborn. "Those are not the ways of my people. But I understand they are yours. Please, try to understand what is ours."

"But Katara's a great person," Aang said, almost pleading. "She'd never want to do that!"

"I have shed enough Fire Nation blood for Kya to rest peacefully," Hakoda said levelly. "If Katara chooses not to shed more, we will all understand." He fixed a stern gaze on Aang. "But after all I've told you of not tampering with others' hearts, how can you say what she should not feel?"

Aang looked away.

He's not getting it. Not really, Sokka thought. "Haven't you ever wanted to do something you knew you never would?" he said impulsively. "You gave us that map, Aang. Even when you wanted us to stay. Can't you trust Katara that much?"

"She said she didn't know me, Sokka." Aang flinched at the thought. "I've been with you guys since the South Pole. How can she not know me? And Zuko-" He gulped. "He was helping us before. And now he says, okay, go murder this guy none of us even knows? Even if - even if you say that's what the Water Tribes do, how can *Zuko* be okay with this? He wants Katara to kill one of his own people!"

"Twinkletoes," Toph said levelly, "that's not what the letter said." She scowled. "If you don't stop jumping around like a rabbiroo and *listen*, you're never gonna get earth."

Sokka blinked, trying to remember the wall of words that had crushed Katara. "So... what'd it say to you?"

"Zuko never said he wanted anyone to die."

"Is something wrong with your ears?" Aang jabbed a finger toward her robes, where Toph still had Zuko's hateful documents tucked away. "He said he had to let Katara kill him!"

"Uh-uh," Toph shook her head. "He said he had an *obligation*. 'Cause Katara's mother was murdered, and that was unjust, and he's a great name. He *has* to do something. Or everything just - falls apart."

"Not making sense here," Sokka said thoughtfully.

"I know, this is hard... Ugh." Toph rubbed her forehead. "Okay, listen. My Dad's a Bei Fong. Everybody knows us. They know our word is good. So sometimes, when two merchants are fighting? They come to us, and bring their contracts, so my parents can read them and say who's right."

Hakoda's brows rose. "So in your own way, your father is a chieftain."

"Kind of," Toph shrugged. "He doesn't fight. That's what guards are for. But he does... solve things, I guess." She frowned. "So this is the sticky part. If my parents find out somebody *broke* their *contract* - my dad's got to do something. Even if the contract wasn't with him. He's got to, because the Bei Fongs are honorable merchants, and everybody knows it. We can't just be as good as everybody else. We've got to be better. 'Cause every merchant looks at how we act, and that's what makes trade work." She grumbled something under her breath. "I don't know how to say it..."

"Hang on," Sokka said, mind racing. He had the pieces, he could feel it. "It wasn't honorable for Zuko to grab Gran-Gran, because she wasn't armed..." He stopped. "You're saying, even in the Fire Nation, killing Mom was *wrong*."

"Way wrong," Toph nodded. "And Zuko's a noble. He's got to do something about it." She waved a hand Aang's general direction. "It's like my parents. Katara says the Fire Nation's evil, that they're all monsters? One of them *was*. And he's gotta pay for it. Or everything everyone expects, all the rules you lean on to trust people when you don't know them - it all falls apart."

"But it's awful," Aang whispered.

Toph's shoulders fell. "Asiavik? When Zuko was sick, he was cold. Iroh tried to keep his inner fire going. Kept him *hot*. If Katara's burning up..."

"Dunk her in water?" The healer nodded. "At this point, it can't hurt-"

A wave of Aang's arms, and water crested the side of the ship to crash over into the canoe.

Dripping, Sokka sighed.

Scolding, Momo landed on Hakoda and shook himself, wide green eyes miffed. A rumble, and Appa swam closer, lifting his head to look at them.

Asiavik ignored it all, feeling Katara's pulse, then the vessels along her throat, as he held her head above ice-chilled water. Waited. And, finally, smiled. "Better."

Aang grinned. "See? She's going to be-"

Asiavik's look cut him off. "I don't know," the healer said bluntly. "If her fever spikes again, we may lose her. But this is better." He snapped a glance at Toph. "Do you know anything else?"

"Moonrise could help," Toph said plainly. "Sunrise did, for Zuko. Her spirit's kind of... fighting itself. We gotta keep her going with her element until it's settled."

One way or another, Sokka finished silently. *No. Don't think like that. Katara's strong. If Zuko did this, she can do it.*

"So why was Zuko fighting himself?" Hakoda said levelly.

Toph swallowed hard.

Hakoda nodded. "A secret, then?"

"No," the earthbender admitted. "Just something Iroh should be saying, instead of me. Only he's not here." She let out a breath. "Fire's not tied up with family. Fire is *loyalty*."

Sokka groaned. "Yeah, we know, everyone in the Fire Nation is loyal to the-"

Oh. No.

Aang was almost ice-pale. "You mean... Zuko, he..."

"Thought he was going to die saving us." Toph's words hit like blocks of stone. "*Die*. Not 'cause Azula would kill him. 'Cause even if *maybe* he lucked out and got her first - his own fire would kill him." She swallowed, eyes moist. "He disobeyed the *Fire Lord* to save *you*."

"He knew." Sokka felt faint. "He knew?"

"He's a great name," Toph bit out. "Yeah. He knew." Small fists clenched. "Kyoshi *made* the great names be loyal to the Fire Lord. If he says fight, they have to fight. If he says peace, they make peace. If he says *kill the Air Nomads*..."

Aang sat down, hard.

Kind of wish I could pass out, Sokka shivered. "You mean, in the tent, when Zuko..."

"He told you," Toph said bluntly. "He knows what Kyoshi did to his people. He doesn't want it to happen to anyone else."

And he already missed dying once, the sarcastic part of Sokka's brain quipped. *What else could Aang do to him?*

Right. Zuko had thought he was going to die, but he hadn't, because Iroh-

Oh, spirits. No.

"Mountains fight," Sokka got out, horrified. "The wave clans... they must have been the healers. Kyoshi-" He couldn't say it.

"And with no healers, people in the tribe-" Asiavik shuddered. "Tui and La. The boy wasn't kidding. They went *insane*."

Sokka lunged before Aang could grab his glider, fighting rising winds. "It's not your fault!"

"It *is*, you hear what they're saying - let me go!"

"No! It's not your fault!" Sokka said fiercely. "You're not Kyoshi. You're not Roku! You're Aang. This war is *Sozin's* fault. Not yours."

"But I'm the Avatar-"

"That's not your fault either!"

Winds died.

"You said you never wanted to be the Avatar," Sokka said into the ringing silence. "Man, I wouldn't want to be, either. Kyoshi screwed up - stop *squirming*, hear me out - we're friends, okay?" He met that angry, scared gray gaze. "She screwed up, and Roku didn't fix it, and Sozin took bad stuff and made it a nightmare for the whole world. And none of them were *you*." He took a breath. "There's a war. And Sozin's Comet is coming. And we've got to stop the Fire Lord. *That's not our fault*. Not ours. Not yours. Not even Zuko's. It just *is*." Sokka let go a little, ready to grab on again if Aang bolted. "If your canoe gets smashed up in the ice field, and you've got to walk back or freeze, do you think it's your fault the ice was there? No! You say some bad words, and you kick a lump, and you just start walking."

Aang sagged, and gulped for air. "It's just... Sokka, it's so *big*."

"One step at a time," Sokka said firmly. "We'll change the plan. We'll work it out, I promise." *Wait. Wait a minute...*

"Sokka?" Hakoda asked.

"This could make things simpler," Sokka said, half to himself.

"Oh no." Asiavik gave Hakoda a sharp glance. "I know what *that* look means."

"No, think about it!" Sokka let go of Aang, a grin slowly creeping onto his face. "The war just *looks* big. We're up against the Fire Nation, and they're everywhere. But if all of them are loyal to the Fire Lord..."

"Then Roku's right!" Aang straightened, color coming back into his face. "If I stop the Fire Lord, it's over!"

"And I think *stop him* is what we want," Sokka admitted, aware of a dozen other listening ears beyond their group. "If we kill Ozai, Azula ends up in charge. And she's nuts."

"I don't have to kill him," Aang whispered. Shuddered, and looked around at watching blue eyes. "I thought... if the Water Tribes want revenge..."

"There are more ways to take revenge than just killing a man," Hakoda said plainly. "The war needs to stop. That comes before any vengeance."

Aang brightened, obviously following that thought to its logical conclusion. Sokka *almost* said something-

Water Tribe vengeance, sure. Zuko just handed Katara Fire Nation vengeance, or did you not notice? And Katara doesn't always listen to Dad-

No, he decided. Leave it. Get Katara better first. Then we can fight.

And sometime soon, he had to do something really nice for Toph. Who was keeping her head, even without a scrap of earth around, and making sure Asiavik had extra hands to hold Katara steady when he had to warm up and shake away bits of slush. And who'd just gotten out of the way, without a fuss, as Aang charged in and started talking to Katara; that it was okay, he was sorry he hadn't gotten it before, she could wake up any time now...

Hakoda's hand on his shoulder drew Sokka away from them. "There's one problem with Aang's plan," Hakoda murmured.

Problem? Sokka thought. *What problem? We stop the Fire Lord, and everybody's-*

Uh-oh. "Zuko," Sokka muttered. "But he helped us."

"He helped Toph," Hakoda corrected. "And he prevented Aang from affecting us the way Kyoshi did his people. I know. I also know he did that because he considered us honorable opponents." The chief looked weary, and sad. "But you heard what he said. Before, we know his actions were driven by the Fire Lord's will. Now? He claims a freedom Toph says no firebender has had in centuries. He has *broken tradition*. He may do anything now. Honorable or not."

Zuko? Sokka thought in disbelief. But... he didn't *know*. Fire Nation honor wasn't the same as the

Water Tribes, and trying to figure out the differences made his head hurt. "Toph trusts him."

"He hurt one of my children," Hakoda said levelly. "I will never forgive him for that."

"But Katara was-"

"He's not Water Tribe," Hakoda cut him off. "He had no right."

Sokka tried to keep his jaw from dropping. "But, Dad-"

"Let's not worry your young friends," Hakoda said firmly. "If Air Nomads don't kill... well. We'll hunt that seal when the time comes."

"But... Zuko?" Sokka got out, disbelieving.

"He thinks we mean to kill his people. And General Iroh now fights beside him," Hakoda said soberly. "We need to deal with the Fire Lord first. After that..." The chief sighed, and gave him a weary smile. "One enemy at a time." Straightening his shoulders, he turned to eye the sail, gauging the wind.

Stunned, Sokka drifted back toward Toph, flopping down beside her as his feet informed him they'd kind of had enough, thanks. "Are you okay?" he blurted out.

"Katara's sick, Aang's only half listening, and your dad thinks Zuko's as nuts as we know Azula is," Toph snorted, keeping her voice low. "Oh. And I can't see anything. Besides that? I'm great."

Damn. He'd remembered Toph's eyes. It was so easy to forget her ears. "Don't-"

"Don't ask me not to warn Sparky, Sokka. Just - don't." She looked lost and small. "Amaya's been telling him about the Water Tribes. I kind of think he won't be surprised."

Sokka winced. "Why would she even do that?" he said impulsively. "Apprentice, sure, why not? But she called him part of her tribe. To us. That's... he doesn't even look Water Tribe!"

"That's not what Ba Sing Se thinks." Toph grinned like a leopard-shark. "They think he's from the Foggy Swamp."

Sokka blinked, struck by the awful image of Zuko in leaves and a loincloth. And wished *he* were blind. "Toph? I will hate you for that forever."

"You mean he really does?" Toph cocked her head, intrigued.

"Well, kind of... they're weird too, but I don't think the Fire Nation eats *bugs*-"

"Oh yeah," Toph grinned. "They make silk, like a lot of places in the Earth Kingdom. Our silk-makers usually feed the leftovers to the fishponds after we get the silk off. They fry 'em, with some sizzling spices. Mom had the cook make some for guests," she added at his gurgle of surprise. "I snuck off with a few. Whoo, *hot*."

"...Please tell me fire flakes aren't bugs," Sokka said faintly.

Toph let him sweat, then smirked. "Nope. I think they do something with potato-chokes."

Oh. Well, good.

Only, not good. "Why does my dad think Zuko would come after us?" Sokka tried to keep his

voice just above a whisper. "If Aang stops Ozai, Azula doesn't take over. The war's done. Everybody lives."

Toph looked somber. "When your dad's guys went after the *Wani*, didn't Zuko tell them they weren't part of the war?"

"Well, yeah, but they're..." Sokka swallowed, realizing what he'd almost said.

"They're Fire Nation," Toph said grimly. "Think about that. The Avatar's supposed to give the world justice, right? Only Kyoshi kicked 'em while they were down, and chained them there. Your dad said it: if you can't trust the Avatar, what are you gonna do?" She shook her head. "He's your dad. I'm just guessing. But I'm thinking *he's* thinking what a Water Tribe chief might do, if Aang said, hey world, these are the bad guys, and look, I just *made* them stop fighting." She poked him in the arm; not hard, more like making sure he was still there. "What would you do?"

"I'd hide us," Sokka said, not even stopping to think. "The world is *huge*. If all of it's mad at you... maybe the Foggy Swamp is crazy, but they're *alive*."

"That's not what your dad did."

"Yeah, well, Dad's never seen Aang cut loose all glowy-" Sokka cut himself off.

"No," Toph said quietly. "I guess he hasn't."

Sokka rubbed his head, putting it together. "Dad thinks Zuko's like a chief's son. Which is kind of right, but... for us, the honorable thing to do is take the fight right to the bad guys. Out in the open, where everyone can see. Only... I think that's like what the Fire Nation calls High War. The Dragon of the West with Ba Sing Se. Zhao, up at the North Pole. If that's High War - that's what you do when you're strong enough to face your enemy."

"Sounds like it," Toph nodded.

"But Zuko quit doing that months ago." Sokka frowned. "He snuck into the North Pole. Somehow. I don't know how-"

"Took a kayak, figured out where the sentries weren't watching, and followed turtle-seals under the ice," Toph reported. "Uncle taught him something special with firebending. So if he's careful, he doesn't freeze. Even if he *is* stuck in ice."

Sokka felt chill. "You mean, when Pakku called that ice-wave a finishing move..."

"Not joking," Toph finished for him. "It *ought* to kill firebenders. Zuko just knows how not to die."

Sokka winced. "We'd better tell Aang. Before he does that to somebody who doesn't." And he'd thought things couldn't get any messier. "Turtle-seals. Okay, somebody needs to know the difference between stupid and desperate, and it's *not* me."

"Huh?" Toph frowned.

"You know how long turtle-seals can hold their breath?" Sokka said practically. "Follow one down, you might not come up again. That was *stupid*."

"...I'm going to kick his butt," Toph declared.

"Think you still can?" Sokka said soberly. "What we saw, with the ship..."

"Yeah, I felt it. He's been practicing." She cracked her knuckles. "Get some rocks on this boat, and so will I."

"Do my best," Sokka sighed. "Man, Azula was scary. Zuko and Iroh are pushing it up a notch-

That's it.

"They're some of the scariest benders I've ever seen, but they're *still* not as scary as Aang," Sokka said plainly. "And they know it, don't they? They're going to stick to Low War. Fooling people. Sneaking. You say Zuko's not loyal to the Fire Lord anymore, and that's what's important. But Dad thinks Zuko could come after us after we get Ozai, because that's what a chief's son would *do*. The chief is family. You don't leave him captured. You rescue him. And you make it bloody. But Zuko..." Tui and La, this was *hard*. "Zuko's not thinking *my chief*, or *my dad*. He's thinking, *my men. My people. My uncle*." Sokka groaned, frustrated. "But that doesn't fit, I thought I had it, but he acts like Iroh is family and Ozai and Azula aren't, I don't get it-"

"Easy, Snoozles. You're close." Toph patted his shoulder, only missing a little. "It's words that don't all mean the same thing again. Yeah, Uncle's family. But that's not all he is. Dragon of the West, remember? General Iroh. And *Prince* Zuko." She smirked. "Prince ranks general. Guess that does make it kind of confusing."

Sokka blinked, putting that together with what he'd heard and seen of the Earth Army. Generals were in charge, and everybody else with the weird titles did what the generals said. Even if it wasn't the brightest plan out there. Only the generals in Ba Sing Se were willing to take orders from the Earth King... "You mean, Zuko was in charge of that ship *the whole time*?"

"The *Wani*? Yep," Toph said gleefully. "*Suzuran*? Captain Jee must have wiggled around his orders so Zuko's still his commanding officer. So yeah. Zuko's in charge. Uncle's helping, sure. But Zuko's the one who's responsible. For all of them. Like he feels responsible for the Fire Nation, even if Ozai is the Fire Lord. That's what *prince* means." She nodded. "I think you got it. He's not going to fight. He's going to run. And hide."

Because risking his own neck was one thing, Sokka realized. But when everyone was going to die - his ship, his uncle... "Iroh. The Moon." He took a deep breath. "Iroh was okay with being a traitor, even when he knew it could kill him. Because the Fire Nation needs the moon too."

"Not sure I could do that," Toph admitted. "For you guys, yeah. You're family. We don't owe each other. But Uncle and Zuko? They're soldiers. They can die for people they don't even *know*."

The world tilted. Sokka put his head down, and breathed.

"You okay?" Toph gripped his arm, worried.

"No," Sokka admitted. "That's just... I mean, Katara cares about *everybody*... No." He shook his head. "She cares about everybody we *meet*. Mostly. Which is kind of nice, and kind of messy - well, you've seen it. If Aang's supposed to save the world, we need to focus on helping him-" Sokka had to stop again. "Save the world. That's just - Toph, I don't even know if I can *think* like that. I want to save us. The Water Tribes. People we've met. People we care about. Save the *world*..."

"Like you said." Toph gave him a wry grin. "One step at a time."

"Yeah, but-" He waved a frustrated hand. "Iroh. And Zuko. They really are trying to save the world. The Fire Nation part of it." Sokka swallowed dryly. "Man. When you said Zuko was scared

all the time? This is why. Isn't it. Spirits, it's *so big*..."

Toph punched him in the arm.

"Ow!" Sokka scowled. "Toph! I'm serious."

"Me, too," Toph said soberly. "Sokka, we can't save the world if we're worrying about it all the time. It's like a rumble. Yeah, once in a while you gotta step back and feel out the whole thing. Who's fresh, who's barely hanging in there, who you need to just laze around and let him wear himself out, so you can save the heavy moves for a nasty guy later. But when you're in a fight? You have to be *there*. *Now*. Or while you're worrying about the next guy, *this* guy is going to smear you all over the ring."

"I guess you're right," Sokka said reluctantly. "I just- how does he do it?"

"Kicks the ice, says a lot of bad words, and starts walking."

Sokka stared at her. And had to slap himself in the forehead at the sheer idiocy of doing it; not only could she not see it, they were on a *ship*. She couldn't feel it either.

"Seriously," Toph said to his silence. "Sparky should have been an earthbender. He lives his whole *life* like that, Sokka. The world's bigger and badder and meaner than he is, and it wants him dead. He just won't quit." She nodded, proud. "So he fights what he can. When he can't - he figures something else out. Run. Hide. Sneak. He knows he can't take the Avatar one on one. So he *won't*."

"So what is he going to do?" Sokka pounced.

Deliberately, Toph closed her mouth.

"Okay, I guess I asked for that," Sokka said glumly. "All right. Can we - can we *deal*?" He hoped that was the right word. Spirits, who knew the Earth Kingdom was so different?

Feeling along his arm, Toph gripped his wrist. "Okay. Talk to me."

"You said that Lee wanted the war to stop," Sokka said bluntly. "So do I. And I'm going to help Aang stop it. I don't want to kill the Fire Nation." He hesitated, feeling that old wound. *Mom*...

But damn it, he *didn't*. The guy who'd done it - yeah. In a heartbeat. And he'd met plenty of other Fire Nation rats. But some people... some people were just *people*.

"That'd just make the mess worse, right?" Sokka said at last. "Aang's the last airbender, and the world's already out of whack. If there weren't any firebenders left - that'd be bad, too."

"Yeah," Toph nodded.

"Iroh tried to save the Moon, because he doesn't want the world hurt more either," Sokka went on. "And if he's the guy Zuko cares about like family... This is hard, Toph. I believe *you*, but-" He took a breath. "I'm going to believe what you said. I'm going to try. Zuko wants the war to stop? Okay. But he wants to save his people. How can he do that without stopping Aang?"

"Zuko wants a lot of things he knows he's not gonna get, Sokka," Toph said bluntly. "He knows he can't save all of them."

That's not an answer-

Sokka stopped himself from snarling that. Barely. Because - it was. Just not how he'd thought. "He

can save Iroh," Sokka said slowly, thinking it through. "He can save *Suzuran* - if they're taking orders from him, not the Fire Lord, they're out of the war..." *One step at a time. How would I save the Fire Nation, if I can't save all of it? Maybe there's other girls behind those skull masks, but there can't be a lot... He needs more people.*

More people who weren't loyal to the Fire Lord. Where could he find those?

Paper rattled.

"Seriously, what is with you people?" Toph said impatiently. "I'm *blind!*"

Sokka glanced that way. "Toph? There's nothing there-"

Stomp, stomp, kick!

And empty air had just kicked him in the shins. Yelping, Sokka bit back bad words, hopped up, and snatched fluttering paper from in front of Toph's face. Started to read, and stiffened. *Oh man, now what?* "Um, Aang? It's for you."

Reluctantly, Aang dragged himself away from Katara and took the tattered scrap of paper. Scratched the side of his head, where days unconscious had left a dusting of black hair. "What's a *betobeto?*"

Tippety-tappety-tippety-tappety-tip...

It sounded like dancing footsteps, Sokka realized. So why did he feel like something was giggling at them?

Spirits. Never mess with spirits...

Hands against hands, the back of her hand yielding and deflecting the push of a palm.

"Relax. Breathe. Feel the water. Do nothing unneeded."

Step and step. Now she pushed, and the other deflected, gentle as snow falling. Advance and retreat. Balance.

"Relax. Breathe..."

Katara opened her eyes.

Yue smiled at her. *"There you are."*

Step. And circle. "What are we doing?" Katara said warily. Dark; dark everywhere, like a night before blizzard winds.

"What Yugoda did not know she had to teach you." A slow spiral, as they moved forward and back, waves on a shore. *"In a way, Aang's friend was lucky. His teacher assumed nothing."*

"Aang's friend?" Katara asked, curious.

"Follow me."

Advance and retreat. Hands softly against glowing hands, until she could feel the rhythm like her own heartbeat.

They parted, hands lowering, and Yue smiled again. *"Come here, little sister."*

...No one had hugged her like this since Mom died. "Why?" Katara choked out. "Why, why, *why*?"

"Very wise."

Katara blinked, and looked up into brilliant blue. "You mean... nobody's asked you?"

"Why ask what you believe you know?" Yue tugged them both down, until they knelt on darkness that rippled like a quiet pool. *"Look. And feel."* She reached down, silvery glow dipping into black-

Something writhed in the dark.

"Show no fear. My brother distracts our foe. Look..."

-And she breathed in roses and hot spices, scents whispering through air with a push of her hands to ease her patient's breathing. Steel was a familiar weight on her back as she ran her fingers over the little girl's chest, coaxing breaths deeper and longer. To touch air was to touch chi, and to touch chi was to heal...

Hands shaking her, flee, fly, Xiangchen's followers are coming-!

-Clay slick and warm against her skin as she moved over the infection, drawing out the putrid matter to leave healthy flesh behind. She nurtured crackles of energy in the clay, sparked by chi and lodestone grains, stubbornly matching the body of the young soldier until it agreed to mend...

Chin, burrow away, Chin is firing the town-!

-Fire slid between her hands, fierce as the sun's heat beating down on the sea. She drew its strength into the old fisherman's broken arm, commanding flesh and bone to mend and grow...

Shadow looming before the sun; she didn't need the screams to know Sozin's slayers had found her-

And she was Katara again, and Water Tribe, and weeping.

"I am here," Yue murmured. *"I will always be here."*

"Why?" Katara managed. "Why did they kill us?"

"All medicines are poisons."

Katara blinked, and drew back a little. That wasn't clear at all. Why couldn't Yue just say-

She's a spirit now. Aang's the bridge to the spirit world. Maybe... she's trying as hard as she can?

"You mean healers... hurt the spirits?"

"Healers are human. Humans change what-will-be. There is imbalance."

Katara stared into shimmering blue, and shivered. "Spirits want us to suffer? To die?"

"Imbalance must be corrected." Yue's fingers interlaced with hers. *"There is... disagreement."*

Katara swallowed, feeling her world tremble. "But... there's a spirit who wants healers to die."

"Yes."

"Then stop it!"

"*The imbalance is.*" Yue looked down. "*If humans were no more, it might not be.*" Unearthly blue met human. "*Some believe humans are part of the balance. My brother. Myself. Some others.*"

Katara started to speak... and stopped, and took in the black stillness around them. "You're not supposed to be doing this?"

"*Destruction is easy. Creation is not. Much has been destroyed. It is... not fair.*"

Katara looked away, trying to put the fragments together. *I wish Sokka was here. He's better at puzzles, he always knows how to get around something people think can't be done- oh.* "Humans did it. Maybe a spirit *wanted* it, but humans did it. Like Zhao killed you."

"Yes." Warmth, wrapping her like summer water.

"If we broke it, we have to fix it." Katara glanced up. "But if we don't even know something needs to be fixed..."

Yue winked at her.

Bring healing back. Bring balance back- Katara sucked in a breath, shocked. "You helped Zuko!"

"*It cost him dearly.*"

"Cost him?" Katara snarled. "I lost my mother! What did he lose, a stupid throne? I hate him. I hate him! *I hate him!*"

"*The tide rises, and falls. The sea nurtures, and kills.*" Yue's eyes were no longer gentle, but fierce as a storm. "*You are one of mine. Love. Hate. Heal. Kill. Live.*"

Katara gulped, trying not to sob. "You... don't think I'm awful...?"

"*You are my little sister. I love you. Always.*"

Sobbing, Katara leaned into comforting arms.

An endless time later, Yue pointed to rippling black below. "*There is something else you might see.*"

Katara wiped her eyes, and looked down. *That looks like Kuei's throne room...*

"I'm going to die," Captain Lu-shan muttered under his breath. "I'm going to be a greasy spot on the audience room floor, and no one's even going to send a note of condolence to my wife."

Waiting with the captain, far back in the throng of senior officers eager to report to the princess, Master Sergeant Yakume did his best to give the Guard a reassuring smile. If it was a little wry... well, given the circumstances, he didn't think Lu-shan would fail to appreciate the irony. "I don't think anyone can hold you accountable, Captain."

"I hold myself accountable, Master Sergeant," Lu-shan said stiffly. "I never thought... I never saw... Oma and Shu, how could Amaya do that to us?"

"The Water Tribes aren't civilized people," Yakume said dryly. "I'm sure she had her reasons."

"Reasons for hiding the *Fire Prince* in Ba Sing Se?" Lu-shan snarled under his breath.

Gently. Gently. The man is torn, Yakume thought. He'd caught the Guard captain out fair and square, laying out facts and reports that proved just how deeply the man's station was entwined in unwitting treachery to Ba Sing Se. Enough damning information to allow even the most lenient *Earth Kingdom* administrator to condemn them all...

But the Fire Nation was *not* the Earth Kingdom. And Yakume had given his word: so long as Lu-shan cooperated, he would do his best to see no innocent soul suffered. "She may not have known who he was," the master sergeant pointed out, voice just as low. "Huojin said he didn't know until the Avatar identified him, correct? I believe him."

Lu-shan shot him an incredulous glance. "He's gone. His whole family is *gone*, and our station's left to take the blame, and he's been lying to us his whole life. And you think I should believe *anything* he's said?"

Reciprocity, Yakume nodded to himself. *This could get ugly, very quickly*. Which would not be helpful to eventually integrating Ba Sing Se into the empire. "It may look bad on the surface, Captain, but I believe he was trying to protect you."

"By lying and running away?" Lu-shan bit out.

"Yes," Yakume agreed levelly. "And it will work."

Lu-shan fixed a startled gaze on him.

"He must have realized he'd given himself away," Yakume went on, watching tension ease from the captain's shoulders. From the reports, Huojin *had* been a good and loyal Guard; it had to hurt his captain to think ill of him. "By taking himself and his clan out of your station's protection, he removes any need for retribution against you. We don't hold one man guilty of another's crimes. You knew at the same time I did, that was obvious. Actually, you knew a bit after," Yakume mused. "So you had no time to consider attempting treachery by concealing him. Which means you and the station are safe. *Very* honorable."

Lu-shan reddened, looming... then frowned, and thought. "When did you know?"

"The minute I saw him," Yakume admitted. "You're very sheltered, here inside the Walls, for all that you have refugees here from across the Earth Kingdom. You're used to people who look a bit different simply being from another distant village. I've seen people from across the continent. Dress, speech, a queue of hair - he blended in well, I'll give him that. Like a chameleon-skink on fresh-burned pine sandhills. But that temper..." Yakume chuckled.

"Plenty of people have tempers," Lu-shan growled.

"Of course," Yakume nodded. "It's what set it off that's the key, Captain. He is *loyal* to Amaya. Water Tribe or not. She sheltered him. That's not something a child of Fire treats lightly."

"Loyal to her, not us," Lu-shan said flatly. "The damn prince-"

"Amaya's apprentice," Yakume stated, letting the insult slide. For now. Captain Lu-shan was the key to his Guard station, and the Lower Ring was the key to holding the city. Handle this well, handle it *justly*, and the occupation would be that much safer for everyone. "A firebender of the royal line, old enough to be seeking retainers. Don't blame Huojin. He never stood a chance."

"I don't," Lu-shan said sourly. "I blame her."

Of course you do, Yakume thought, somewhat sad. *She brought trouble to your village - the Guard*

is a village, of sorts - and that is just not to be tolerated, is it?

Earth was predictable. Those of the Earth Kingdom lived on deals and bargains, written and unwritten. Marriage contracts. Unbetrothed women never traveling without an older chaperone, to ensure those contracts would be honored. The unspoken agreement within every village that one of yours was *always* right, and supported against any trouble - and in return, no villager would *ever* act to put all his neighbors at risk.

Which Healer Amaya had. Spirits, he felt sorry for her. She was Water Tribe, she likely considered many of the Guards her family. She'd never expect betrayal.

And Huojin, and all those like him, would never consider betraying her, Yakume knew. She was their shelter from the storm of war. They'd die first.

Which was likely one reason why that small army of refugees had vanished. Any child of Fire who'd gotten all the way to Ba Sing Se *really* didn't want to die.

As General Iroh didn't.

"Never thought any of you had green eyes," Lu-shan grumbled. "How's a man supposed to *know*?"

Yakume shrugged, as if it were nothing. Which it most certainly was *not*.

It was impossible. It *had* to be impossible. Yet all the reports on "Lee" agreed.

Uncanny green eyes, witness after witness attested. *Like the palace fires*.

Prince Zuko had *Sozin's* eyes. Pale gold, burning like the sun.

Pale gold mentioned, quite clearly, on his wanted poster. Which Huojin had read. Yakume had watched him. And yet the Guard had never once stated the obvious: that gold could not become green, no more than a rabbiroo could change into a cat-owl.

Huojin. Lee. Mushi. Every one of Healer Amaya's refugee patients who'd vanished, every one who couldn't be traced back to family in Ba Sing Se...

Green eyes. How did she do it?

Waterbending was bizarre. Everyone knew that. Every tactical manual hinted it might have... unsettling applications not yet seen and reported by survivors. But this was surreal. To put together facts on the missing princes, and the tiny army of vanished refugees, and realize what Amaya must have been up to for *thirty years*...

Yakume shook his head, still half convinced he was crazy. If it hadn't been for that hawk from *Suzuran*... well, a bird from Captain Jee's ship, supposedly with no message, when the Avatar's bison had last been reported fleeing toward Chameleon Bay? Screw-ups or not, that was stretching the bounds of coincidence too far.

General Iroh is headed this way. And he is not happy.

What do I do?

Some would say there was no question to be considered. General and crown prince Iroh might have been in the past, but he was a traitor now. No one could owe him loyalty. And yet...

We lost Prince Lu Ten, and the general did not falter. He grieved - but he looked at what was

possible. *He gave up his own vengeance, to break the siege for us.*

Men were alive today who never would have survived, had General Iroh pressed the attack. Including one Master Sergeant Yakume.

My lord. How could you have become a traitor to us? Why?

He had to know. He *had* to.

So. He would report what he knew: that there were Fire Nation refugees in the city, who had apparently disappeared. Given they had not come to show their loyalty to the princess, anyone could draw the obvious conclusion that they never would. Which made them traitors as well, and a potential source of rebellion far more vicious and ruthless than any Earth Kingdom city could spawn.

If the rumors are true, Princess Azula killed their lord. They'll want her dead.

And they'd be very, very hard to stop. Loyalty gave even the frailest child strength... and Prince Zuko's death would not prevent that. He had been a firebender of Sozin's line, blood and bone of Fire Sages for countless generations, and there would be no ceremony to lay his angry spirit to rest. Not for an exile.

I don't think an exile's ever been a lord before. Agni, what a mess.

Well. The line was moving up. Yakume shifted his written report from hand to hand, far less confident in the outcome of this interview than he ever intended to let on to Lu-shan. General Iroh might have been more calm and level-headed than most, but the line of Sozin was well-known for their tempers...

"Captain Taka," the princess said levelly to an officer in front of them. "Your segment of the Middle Ring is under control?"

"Yes, Princess," the captain bowed. "Our soldiers have served valiantly against the cowardly-"

"Facts first. Bravery later." Dark gold eyes narrowed slightly. Bouncing in the background just behind the throne, the little braided chi-blocker fixed her own worried gaze on the captain.

"The most cowardly hand can be the most dangerous, if it stabs you in the back," Princess Azula went on. "Those worthy of mention are in your report?"

"Of course, your highness." Captain Taka bowed again. "But it would mean a great deal if you yourself-"

" Kararin. Kororin. Kankororin! "

About to step forward under the brooding gaze of Lady Mai, Yakume froze. That... *couldn't* be what it sounded like.

"Yah-ha-hah-ha!"

Little feet drumming like quenching rain. Little clawed hands grasping. Wide, staring single eyes set in flesh of flexing straw, and slobbering tongues lolling from fanged mouths.

Bakezori!

Cackling, the wave of little monsters swarmed over the throne.

Fire, chains, and arrow-like kunai flew.

When it was over, and the stench of burned straw tainted the air, Yakume rose with Lu-shan from their hastily-sought cover behind a giant ornamental vase. "Agni," he breathed, glancing over twitching monsters impaled through the eyes. "I *have* to ask if she's still single."

"She's *armed!*" Lu-shan sputtered, eyeing the dour-faced noblewoman as if she'd sprouted fangs and horns. "And you're married."

"Of course I'm married," Yakume said, surprised. "I have sons." Not that Governor Tsumami would be likely to entertain the thought of such an arrangement. But a man could dream.

And... why, exactly, was Lady Mai watching the Dai Li haul off the *bakezori* with such a carefully neutral face?

"Sandal-monsters," Lu-shan shuddered. "Damn it, the Dai Li are falling down on the job. Decent people aren't supposed to have to deal with kamuui!"

Yakume's brows went up. "Fire Sages are usually very decent people," he said sternly. "Quite honored, and honorable. Don't your priests of Guanyin hold consolation ceremonies?"

"Ceremonies, sure," Lu-shan snorted. "Hunt evil spirits? Do that even once, the taint never goes away-" He paled.

No fool, Yakume had already started to drop into full prostration the moment he'd sensed people clearing the way before her. "Your highness."

"Master sergeant." Princess Azula's voice was precise, keen as a masterwork blade. Green silk shushed like leaves in the wind, and the scent of fire wafted over him. "Why are you here?" The shift of her feet hinted at a glance toward Lu-shan. "With a rather... unusual companion."

"We have uncovered information that may be vital, your highness." Head still bowed, Yakume offered his report on flattened palms.

The weight of the scroll lifted from his hands. Paper rustled.

Silence.

"I see."

A hiss, not a voice. Hair rose on the back of Yakume's neck as he remembered the old tales, the forbidden tales; the rumors of Sozin's long-vanished mother and the odd, cruel, gold-eyed wife who'd disappeared at his very pyre...

"*Leave us.*"

Evacuating with the rest, Yakume caught a glimpse of the chi-blocker standing out of harm's way, staring fixedly at empty air.

Or - given the *bakezori* - was it empty?

The throne room doors slammed, and he heard the roar of flames.

"How *dare* they!"

Perched up among the pillars with a few terrified Dai Li, Ty Lee breathed a silent prayer of thanks to Tengri that Katara's aura was gone. Azula was going to be upset enough after she'd calmed down. She'd hate it if the Water Tribe girl had seen this.

"I am Father's heir. I am the line of Sozin! He's a weakling, a traitor, *dead!* How can they betray our people for him? Betray our *war!*"

Blue flames blasted, shattering rock and stone.

"It's okay," Ty Lee smiled at the wide-eyed earthbenders clinging near her. "Just stay up here until she calls for us. You'll be fine."

They'd be fine. But what about Azula? Her aura looked *awful*. All clashing colors, and dark veins, and a kind of spin that made her dizzy.

She hit her head. Hard. She even admitted she was seeing two of me. Ty Lee hid her sudden spike of fear. The Academy's training had been very thorough. Including the symptoms of concussions... and what might happen to those left untreated.

Granted, all she'd seen with her outer eyes was Azula losing her temper. But this was Azula. Dizziness, faltering gait, lack of judgment? She'd hide it all.

I have to help her.

It was what Zuko would do, if he were here. It was just sad Azula had never seen that.

Then again, if Azula had been able to see that, what else might she have seen?

You are so, so silly, Aang.

Fire couldn't kill the wind. Burn out pockets of air, yes. Burn so fiercely the wind had to run with it, hidden in the flames. But kill it?

Heat, fuel, air. Agni's sacred triangle.

No. Fire could never kill the wind. Not without killing itself. The wind had blown through the mountains before the temples ever rose; it blew through them now, never ceasing. So what if there were just scattered breezes left? Tengri was patient. There would be time.

Only, maybe not. Because there was an air monk left, and he was the Avatar, and if he won Xiangchen's mess would start *all over again*.

Her family, all the families, were counting on her to make sure that didn't happen.

...Well, not *counting* counting on her. Because they weren't here, and they didn't know. Except for a few bubbly messages Azula had let her send by hawks. But if they knew, they'd be counting on her, and that was good enough.

Sometimes she wished she could just bounce around Aang and *talk* to him. He didn't want people to die, right? That's what her family taught. What the temples were supposed to teach. So why didn't he join Fire Lord Ozai, instead of racing around the world telling people to fight? People *died* when they fought the Fire Nation.

...Well, except when they fought people like her. Why couldn't Aang see that was the right thing to do? She fought people for Azula, Azula got what she wanted, and nobody died. Just look at what

had happened in Ba Sing Se. Long Feng had died, and Zuko, and nobody else.

Poor Zuko.

If Aang showed up again - and Ty Lee just knew he would, waterbenders were tricky that way - she was going to poke him one. Where he'd *feel* it. Zuko was nice. Zuko was kind. Zuko had been General Iroh's son, really, even if the Fire Lord *was* his father. General Iroh was his teacher! Didn't the temples say that was the most important thing of all?

If Aang couldn't see that turning himself in so Zuko could be the heir would have been the right thing to do...

Well. She was *really* going to poke him one.

Flames died.

Tumbling down, Ty Lee landed lightly, folding gently into submission. "Maybe they should have run away and joined the circus, too."

Azula's eyes narrowed. Then, wryly, one corner of her lips turned up. "And who says this isn't one? It even has three rings."

Grinning, Ty Lee looked up. "You can make this work for you. You always do."

About to speak, Azula hesitated. "Uncovering potential traitors all our intelligence networks couldn't find. Yes. There should be a way..."

Ty Lee felt chill. *She had to think about that.*

Some time later, the acrobat cartwheeled down the halls, satchel over her shoulder, seeking the conspiracy she knew was afoot. Mai was good at hiding. But she'd known the sober girl for years. And really, in a place this big, there were only so many places to hide and not *look* like you were hiding.

A handspring in over raised stone, and Ty Lee grinned at Quan and Mai. "So when are you breaking Min out?"

Quan's jaw dropped.

"Azula shouldn't do that to Min's clan," Ty Lee explained patiently. "It's not good for her. And it'll make the other clans upset. She has the rest of the Dai Li; she'll find the traitors sooner or later. A little later won't hurt."

Quan glared at her. "Don't think you can-"

Mai held up a hand. "What do you want?"

"Azula's hurt," Ty Lee said seriously. "She needs a healer."

"She killed the last one she dealt with," Quan said darkly.

Ty Lee glanced down, sad. "Zuko would help her if he were here." She looked pleadingly at Mai. "You know he would."

"She killed him," Mai said flatly.

"The *earthbender* killed him," Ty Lee insisted. "You didn't see him when he came to save Toph. His aura was all... solid." Certain, and brightly glowing, the way it never was around Azula. Zuko had always been afraid of Azula.

And... well, he should have been. He was a firebender, and firebenders were like dragons. Not that she'd ever seen a dragon, no one ever would again, but they were predators who flew, and Ty Lee guessed they'd probably been like messenger hawks. And when hawks raised chicks, and there just wasn't enough for everyone... feeding the strongest made sure one chick survived.

Azula was strong. Zuko - hadn't been. It was sad. But it was the way things had to be.

Why didn't you just run away, Zuko? Run away from the Avatar, and never come back.

But firebenders didn't run.

"I know you're good at plans, but Azula's better," Ty Lee said softly. "Mai. Let me help."

The two conspirators traded glances, and this time Quan waved Mai down. "The *rest* of the Dai Li?"

"Well, you can't stay," Ty Lee said honestly. "Azula can't trust you. But if you go with Min, no one gets hurt."

Mai met her gaze, gold eyes hot with the chained red rage around her. "I'll be up against other agents, Ty Lee. Someone is *going* to get hurt."

"Oh, you silly!" Impulsively, Ty Lee hugged her. "You need to have fun sometimes, Mai. The markets down in the Lower Ring? They have some of the neatest stuff!" A dip and a twirl, and she presented a small wooden box, still smelling ever so faintly of beetles and sand.

Wide-eyed, Mai unlatched the lid. "Shirshu darts?"

Bouncing on her tiptoes, Ty Lee beamed.

Wind and arrows and mocking laughter-

Langxue rolled out of the bottom bunk, and slammed into familiar arms, minus the gloves a Kyoshi Warrior would wear in battle. "Easy, little Captain. I've got you-"

"Saoluan?"

Still kneeling, her grip eased. "You're awake?" Fingers felt his forehead in the dark. "And your fever's down. Oh, Guanyin be thanked... cover your eyes, I'll give us some light."

Wobbly, Langxue sat on the edge of the bunk, eyes slits as Saoluan used spark rocks to set a ship's lantern aglow. *We're on a ship*, he realized, adding up scents and movement and the tight, slightly fish-scented confines of a passenger's tiny cabin. *Pretty far out to sea*. "We left the island."

"Had to," Saoluan admitted. "Someone would have started asking questions, and I'm not that good a liar. Not with that many witnesses... You were starting to worry me. You've been pretty much out of it for two days-" She faced him, and almost dropped the lantern.

Hand shaky, Langxue reached up and pulled stray strands in front of his eyes. Most of it was still dark brown, typical of the island. But where La had touched him...

"Damn," Saoluan breathed. "I didn't think we'd need hair dye. I'll have to ask the crew-"

"Don't waste your time," Langxue growled, brushing white-rooted hairs back from his face. "La is *ticked*. And she wants everybody to know it."

"Going to make it a little tricky to stay out of sight." Saoluan smiled wryly. "Can I know why, or is this a bender thing?"

"It's... kind of complicated," Langxue admitted, feeling his face heat up. "I just- where are we going?"

"Omashu," Saoluan shrugged.

"What? But the Fire Nation-"

"Took it over, call it New Ozai - who gossips with the fishermen, you or me?" Saoluan grinned. "There are still Earth Kingdom troops in the area. And people I know. We can get help there."

"Unless the White Lotus is hiding a spirit-healer La doesn't know about, I doubt it," Langxue growled. "It's north, though. Place to start... what?"

"Um." Saoluan blinked innocently at him. "Who?"

"I can probably give you the signs and countersigns," Langxue said wryly. "Unless they've changed in a thousand years. I kind of doubt it."

Saoluan leaned back against the cabin wall, blue-gray eyes wide. "...Little Captain?"

Langxue swallowed hard, hurt. "It's me," he said guiltily. "And - I don't want to scare you, I don't, but I'm going to... the spirits get what they need, and those of us they tag just have to live with it..."

"Shh." She squeezed into the bed by him, ducking her head under the top bunk. "Take it from the top, okay? The leech. I saw-"

"You saw me airbend," Langxue said quietly. "That's why I was... out of it. Used too much chi, too fast, and I haven't been healed yet." He took a breath. "I know this is going to sound crazy, but a long time ago, some benders could-"

"You're a yāorén."

Langxue shut his mouth before he caught a gnat. "You know?"

"The Grand Lotus seems to have found one," Saoluan said plainly. "Two-element benders. I don't know how that can work-"

"It doesn't. Not without help," Langxue said dryly. "Don't think of it like the Avatar. It's not. The Avatar spirit changes the next incarnation before it's born. He starts with all four, and more power than... well, you can imagine. We start with one. Like any other bender." He paused. "Except we tend to have hard lives. And a lot of bad luck."

"Uh-oh," Saoluan muttered.

"I don't know if kamuiy go after us because we're strong enough to take them, or if we just end up living because we're strong enough," Langxue said honestly. "*Will*, not bending. Some of us start out pretty lousy benders... If you're in the right place at the wrong time, and the Great Spirits *notice* you, and you're praying with everything you've got that you were just *more*, that you just had one

last shot at what's killing you..."

"Be careful what you wish for," Saoluan said ruefully. "Ouch. So you got - noticed."

"Noticed, heck," Langxue grumbled. "I think they were *waiting* for me." At her wary glance, he sighed. "Remember how the priests say if you live a virtuous life, you might get a chance to reincarnate as a human being?"

Saoluan smirked. "They keep telling me I'm going to be a sea slug."

"Don't bet on it." He grinned wryly. "Yāorén do come back. A lot. And we're not that holy. A little too busy getting our hands dirty in other people's messes... anyway. About a thousand years ago, I was one of Avatar Yangchen's yāorén."

Silence.

Langxue swallowed. "I know it sounds crazy-"

"Yes," Saoluan said, oddly thoughtful. "Yes, it does. Except." She looked straight at him. "I know benders, and I know what I saw. Avatar Aang doesn't use a sword. You used a move no one's seen in at *least* a hundred years." She shrugged, smile wry. "So why not a thousand?"

Langxue tried to swallow the sudden lump in his throat. Sniffled, tried to hide it-

"It's okay," Saoluan murmured, gathering him against her shoulder. "It's okay..."

Tears soaked her shoulder. She didn't say a word. Just stroked his hair, like it was any other day that losing everyone had been too much.

Which was exactly what it was, Langxue realized. He didn't remember everything, but he could *feel* it. And knowing they'd all lost hurt all over again...

"Though I kind of cheated," Saoluan mused, voice deliberately light. "I've been listening to you mumble in your nightmares. You really freaked me out. There's no way you could have learned High Court. Not in this life."

Langxue let a last sob shudder out, and raised his head. "*You speak High Court?*"

"*Little*," Saoluan confessed, thumb and finger a fraction apart. "*Only little*." She shrugged. "I read it a lot better. Helped, when Kyoshi Island was staying neutral. Nothing like knowing what the Fire Nation's really up to, so the elders could do things that kept us out of their way."

"I'll have to teach you," Langxue nodded. "We need to find someone."

"In the Fire Nation." Saoluan eyed him, uneasy.

Oh. And the reality of the war crashed back in, and oh Agni, this was such a *mess*...

Deep breath. You're a yāorén. Impossible is what you do. "I don't remember everything," Langxue said bluntly. "I'm not dead. When you're dead, and in the Spirit World - you remember everything you've ever done. Everyone you've ever been. But I'm *not*. I just have bits of what Hyourin remembered. Because La and an old friend messed with me to make *sure* I would. And I think - I think Kaze gave me a little more, *he* knew air, not me. Sure, I watched him bend, but..." *Deep breath. Take it slow.* "It's like trying to grab pieces of a dream." *Or a nightmare.* "When I woke up - I was fighting Koh. And the people helping him." He met her gaze. "I was fighting to protect the

Northern Water Tribe. And I wasn't alone. The Yu Yan were there. On *our* side."

Saoluan stared. "But, the Yu Yan are-"

"The Fire Nation wasn't the enemy!" Langxue cut her off. "Not then. La is Agni's *sister*. Sure, they fight. Family does. But he *loves* her." He swiped at his eyes, angry and hurt and scared. "They're family, and - the world's all wrong..."

"Okay," Saoluan said softly. "Damn lucky I am what you think I am, or I would think you're crazy." She whistled. "Koh. That Koh? You don't make easy enemies."

"Yāorén are supposed to keep people alive until the Avatar can get across the world to handle it," Langxue said dryly. "If it was easy, regular benders could handle it. The Great Spirits wouldn't have to-" He winced.

"You've still got a fever." Saoluan's fingers moved across his forehead. "You should rest."

"That won't fix it," Langxue muttered. "I need to find a spirit-healer. Gaipan. That's where Kaze said they'd be."

"A spirit-healer?" Saoluan raised a brow.

Langxue looked away.

"Hey." Saoluan touched the side of his face, turning him back toward her. "It cost you to save me, huh?"

I'd pay it again. And again, and again... sister... "Never touch the sea when Ocean's angry," he said reluctantly. "Spirits can tear up your chi, if you don't know what you're doing. And - I didn't. Sometimes you get better. But if the scar gets... forced wider..."

"Because you got noticed," Saoluan said quietly.

"Yeah." He shrugged it off. "If there'd been another yāorén to pull me through - I'd just be sick for a while. But there wasn't. So I have to find one."

"Oh." Saoluan looked away. "That could be tricky."

"Tricky?" Langxue repeated warily. *I knew it. I knew it. Kaze always finds trouble.*

"Well... rumor says he was in Ba Sing Se," Saoluan said honestly.

Currently under siege by the Fire Nation. Terrific. "He's not there," Langxue said bluntly. "Or, he *won't* be."

"Okay..." Saoluan eyed him. "The Avatar *is* there."

Oh, wonderful. "Gaipan," Langxue said firmly.

"But you said the yāorén-"

"Ocean's *mad*. The Avatar should have done something about it by now," Langxue said flatly. "Trust me. A yāorén's the *last* person he wants to see." *Because I'd start by ripping off his toenails... deep breath. Calm.*

Geh. Working into a new element was always unsettling. And this promised to be worse than most.

I'm used to fire. And fire pushes back. Air just... scatters.

Meaning water was going to be shoving him harder than usual, until he got his balance again. Wonderful. "We're family, aren't we?" he blurted out.

Saoluan cocked her head at him, and smiled wryly. "Sure you can't do better?"

"Nobody's better," Langxue said plainly. "You were *there*."

Her smile softened, losing the wry edge. "Guess I was." She held out an open arm.

Family. Snuggling in, he took a deep breath, and sighed. *Safe*.

They were on a ship headed away from everything he'd ever known, in the middle of a war that shouldn't be happening. No one was safe.

But he felt safe. For the first time in years.

Take it while you can. The world will crash in soon enough.

"So spirits are part of the Avatar's job." Saoluan leaned her head against his. "Never really thought about that. Everyone knows the Avatar's got to learn the elements. Who teaches him about the spirits?"

"Um." Langxue glanced away, fighting the impulse to whistle innocently.

"...Oh, great," Saoluan said faintly.

"We died!" Langxue said defensively. "There was a siege and an invasion and Koh got past us to wake up a *volcano*, and we *had* to stop it or the North Pole and half the Earth Kingdom..." He winced, even from the shadows of memory. "We died, and there'd been yāorén so long... I guess the spirits forgot. You *need* a spirit-healer, or the tear kills you."

Saoluan frowned. "You said you'd be fine if another yāorén had been there..."

"Most of us were spirit-healers, too. It made things simpler. I'm - not. Not yet. But spirit-healers don't have to be yāorén. A few of them weren't even benders." Langxue shook his head. "Spirits, what could have killed them all... oh."

"If Koh took you out, why stop there?" Saoluan said wryly. And shuddered. "Oma and Shu. Spirits. Give me something I can kill, any day."

"You're strong enough," Langxue told her. "A lot stronger than you think." *And I thought all I had was bad luck. Heh. I should have looked closer.*

"Gaipan, then," Saoluan nodded. "We'll get you fixed up, first." She nudged his shoulder. "So what after that, little Captain?"

"Find out why Ocean's mad, and fix it," Langxue said firmly. "It wasn't anything on the island, or Kaze would have dropped a hint. Must have happened north of us." He winced. "If it's this bad, this far away - did any of your gossip fiends say anything about an earthquake, or flood, or anything? Or is the world *really* screwed, and the Fire Nation's not even giving their enemies proper burial... what?"

Pale, Saoluan swallowed dryly. Started to speak, shook her head-

And drove a punch into the wall.

"Saoluan!" A wave of his hand snatched water from the jug near the hatch, and he grabbed her wrist to clean out any splinters. Saoluan was a swordswoman. She knew better than to mistreat her hands. "Why'd you do that?"

"They didn't tell the kids," Saoluan said, half to herself. "Of *course* they didn't tell the kids. Avatar Aang's the hope of the world, everyone loves him, he's so *nice*... the Fire Navy got their asses kicked, it doesn't matter how..."

Cleaning the last scrapes out, Langxue let them bleed for now. Sometimes you needed pain. "Saoluan. What are you talking about?"

Eyes shadowed, she explained.

"The Avatar did *what*?"

Soundless giggles woke Toph, rippling through the scatter of rocks she'd shoved up against Katara's waterbed of a canoe. Thank goodness for Sokka. She'd still rather be off this boat onto honest land, but at least he'd gotten her enough earth to glimmer around the deck like beacons.

Reaching into dark and chill and wet, Toph felt for Katara's shoulder. "Hey. You back with us?"

"Shoes." A whispered giggle. "Azula... buried in shoes..."

Okay, maybe not quite back yet. "Asiavik! She woke up. Kinda."

"I'm awake, I'm... brrr, *freezing*..."

Scattered rocks told Toph just enough to dodge out of the way, as running feet and yammering questions swept the boat.

"I'm okay," Katara said, over and over. "I think I'm okay... I'm just tired..."

Uh-huh. That didn't sound like okay. Maybe not sick anymore, but not *okay*.

"Your dad told me you don't need revenge anymore," Aang said, somewhere in that babble of getting Katara dried off and wrapped in fur to warm up. "That's great!"

"...He told you that." Katara's voice was ice.

"That's not what he said," Toph stuck in, before Aang could dig himself any deeper. "He said the Fire Lord had to come first."

"Toph!" Aang protested. "I know you like Zuko - I don't know *why* - but that footsteppy thing he sent is driving everyone *crazy*-"

"Not me," Toph smirked, hearing the patter of intangible boots on wood. "Heads up, Twinkletoes."

"What are you- augh!"

Thwack. Thump. Crash!

"...Did I just see air trip Aang?" Katara muttered, dazed.

"Zuko's note said it was a *betobeto*, whatever that is." Sokka's hand latched onto Toph's, pulling the three of them into a furry knot of warmth near Toph's rocks. "Some kind of follow-behind spirit. Mostly harmless." His tone dripped sarcasm.

"It wanted someone to play with, so Sparky told it to go find Aang," Toph grinned, listening to Momo's angry chittering as he dived at the deck near the airbender. And screeching, as the lemur found that, once again, claws didn't seem to touch tip-tapping spirits.

"And it's driving everybody nuts," Sokka groaned.

"So why doesn't Aang find out what it wants, so it can leave us alone?" Katara asked, confused.

"It has what it wants," Toph said bluntly. "It wants to play." She crossed her arms, smirking. "I keep telling him. He wants to be an earthbender? He's got to figure out where his line in the sand is. And what he's gonna do if someone keeps crossing it."

"Toph." Sokka's voice held more than a hint of exasperation. "Zuko did *not* drop this on us to help."

"Nope," Toph admitted cheerfully.

"You... you... I don't get you!" Sokka sputtered. "This thing! And that letter! He's trying to split us apart!"

"He finally gets it," Toph mock-whispered to Katara. "Think we ought to help him throw Aang overboard now?"

"What?" Sokka yelped.

But Toph was listening for a giggle. And got it, as Katara reached out to clasp her hand. "Okay, tell us," the waterbender said firmly.

"Tell us about tossing Aang off the ship?" Sokka muttered. "Toph, I know you think Zuko's got a real person in there somewhere-"

"She said she wants Aang to win," Katara said firmly. "That's the deal, right? Help Aang defeat the Fire Lord."

"Right," Toph nodded. And pointed Sokka's general direction. "You think the Fire Lord's *not* gonna try to mess with our heads?"

Sokka was silent almost a minute. "Run that by me again," he said soberly. "And leave in more pieces."

"Uncle's the Dragon of the West," Toph said practically. "Way I heard it? Him, Azulon, Sozin - They didn't just beat people with tanks and drills and *stuff*. They beat generals because they could think *around* them."

Sokka let out a slow breath. "Okay, let me see if we're thinking the same thing-"

"Wha- oof!" Aang hit the deck near them, rocks trembling as he pushed up with impatient hands. "I think it's playing with Appa for a while... what about the Fire Lord?"

"Something you wouldn't get," Sokka said darkly. "It has to do with families."

"Hey, I know about families-"

"No. You don't," Katara said firmly. "So we're going to have to tell you. You were raised by Gyatso, and I know he was wonderful. But he *adopted* you. You weren't born to his family. There are things you don't know." She stopped. "Spirits. I don't even know where to start..."

"I think what Toph's trying to say is, we don't know much about Ozai," Sokka stated. "But we know Iroh. And Zuko, and Azula. And that tells us a lot."

Aang sat down half-lotus by them, Momo curling on his shoulder with a rough purr. "Because they had the same teachers?"

"Good one," Toph muttered, impressed in spite of herself. "I didn't think of that... yeah. People who train the same way, bend the same way." Like the whole Terra Team, taken down by Mai and Ty Lee in minutes. Whoof. "Only Zuko's been trying to mix up his bending with a few other tricks. Because Azula's better than he is." *Was better. Before. And he still got her a good one. With Kuzon? I'm betting on Sparky.* "But we're talking about the kind of stuff that's *not* bending. You're like your parents, Twinkletoes. Whether you knew them or not."

"But how can that be if they never taught me?" The frown rang through Aang's voice. "I *know* Zuko's not like Iroh, but if Azula's better than he is, he's just not a good student... *now* what?"

Winding up, Toph tried to punch him one.

Wind whistled around her fist. *Darn.*

"What was that for?" Aang demanded.

"Do I look like a badger-mole?" Toph demanded. "They taught *me*. Twinkletoes, I'm *blind*. And I still know I look like my mom." Mostly because people told her that. But there were things she could feel in the earth when her parents walked. Not the same as her own stride, but - they were *hers*.

"People in a family are different, but everyone in one family has a lot in common," Katara said plainly. "That's why we're chiefs. Granddad was a good leader. So is Dad. Sokka will be, too. Someday."

"You want a favor, don't you?" Sokka said suspiciously.

"Not this time."

"What we're trying to get at is, Uncle's kind of famous for messing with people's heads," Toph said practically. "And Azula does it. And now Zuko just drop-kicked a spirit over here to mess with all our heads. Mostly yours," she added. "You gotta realize the Fire Lord might try the same thing. Only a *lot* meaner."

"I thought Zuko said he was trying to help!" Aang objected.

"Yeah?" Toph shrugged. "He's *mad* at you, Aang. He doesn't want to kill you," well, maybe just a *little*, "but you *hurt* him. You can't just let something like that go."

"Yes, you can!" Aang insisted. "The monks always taught us to forgive. Hate just makes you hurt yourself."

Toph jabbed at him again, feeling another puff of air. *Must have gotten close.* "Who's the idiot who told you Zuko hated you?"

"Hello?" Aang said impatiently. "He chased us all over the world!"

"Yeah. He did. Because the Fire Lord ordered him to," Sokka said grimly. "Though honestly? I think he would have come after you anyway. We know how much he cares about Iroh. And Iroh's just his uncle. You're the Avatar. You're going to stop the Fire Lord. Only Ozai's not just the Fire Lord. He's Zuko's *dad*."

Toph almost snarled in frustration. "Damn it, Snoozles, don't you listen? The Fire Nation's got a *bounty* on Zuko's *head*-"

"Yeah, sure. *Now*. Jee didn't even know about attacking the Moon; who knows what the Fire Nation thought happened up north? But back when Zuko started chasing us?" Sokka huffed, and shuddered. "Xiu, Mohe - they've got to be wrong. Parents just... there's no way Zuko would have been after us if Ozai did *that* to him."

"My dad sent *bounty hunters* after me," Toph started.

And all but heard Aang's jaw hit the deck. "You mean... Zuko would have threatened your village, and chased us, and burned down Suki's village, and - all that, everything - because of *family*?" Even through wood, she could feel his shudder. "And Kyoshi killed all those people... no *wonder* the monks didn't want it!"

Still holding onto Katara, Toph felt her cringe. *All right*, the earthbender decided, *I've had enough of this mess*-

Sokka beat her to it. "Are you out of your mind?" he exploded. "Why do you think we're still here, Aang? We've been up against the whole *Fire Nation* for you! Do you think we're doing that just because we're friends? Because it's *the right thing to do*? Let me clue you in, oh mighty Avatar. We're not that good. We're just - not." He dragged in a breath, lowering his voice again. "We're family, Aang. That's why we're here. That's why we'll *always* be here."

Toph tried not to wince. *My family wasn't*.

But they'd tried. They would have been a good family. For a daughter who could see, and who smiled in the right places, and who wasn't an earthbender.

You get me, don't you, Sparky. You didn't fit where the spirits dumped you, either. You are so lucky you have Uncle. She swallowed the lump in her throat. *I miss you guys already*.

"I don't understand," Aang protested. "How can you be good people if you don't care about *everybody*?"

"How can *good people* care about everybody?" Katara shot back. "Some people are evil, Aang! If good people don't stop them, they do - well, you've seen Azula."

"But killing them? There has to be another way!" Aang's voice got a little louder, aimed Toph's way. "Toph. You ran away from your family-"

Don't go there, Twinkletoes. "Family's like bending," Toph said bluntly. "You can help people, or you can really mess them up. Like fire and water. Katara and Zuko? They can *fix* people. Or they can shred them. *Family* didn't kill half the Fire Nation. *Kyoshi* did."

"She couldn't have meant to," Aang whispered. "She was the Avatar. Even if she was born an earthbender - she was an airbender too. She *couldn't* have. Air's not *like* that."

Katara twitched.

"Katara?" Sokka asked.

"You don't know everything air is like, Aang. Yue... showed me things. While I was...away." Katara sucked in a breath. "She showed me there's a spirit trying to get rid of the bending healers. All of them."

Toph shivered. "Why?" she blurted out. "Why would the spirits do that?"

"Why would Wan Shi Tong try to sink us when we're trying to stop the war?" Sokka said grimly. "Not all the spirits like us."

"How'd you know?" Katara sounded startled.

Water splashed as Appa groaned, and Sokka snorted. "Exhibit A's over there with our big furry buddy. Amaya told us about that haima-jiao in Ba Sing Se. Hei Bai almost shredded Senlin Village, and they didn't have anything to do with the forest burning down! Yue? The Ocean? Sure, they're on our side. But if every spirit liked us, this war wouldn't be such a mess." He blew out a breath. "So somebody's out to kill off the Water Tribes *and* the Fire Nation. Man, that makes too much sense-

"Not the tribes. The healing benders." Katara swallowed. "Toph. Can you make some clay?"

Toph frowned. That was a little trickier than just making sand. You had to bend the rocks into *really* tiny pieces. "Sure." Picking up a pebble, she crunched it in her hand a few times, tiny particles slipping over her fingers like silk. She breathed in the dust of it, moistened with salt spray, remembering days in the tunnels, a badger-mole suckling kits with a low, almost inaudible purr...

"Do you remember what Zuko's healing felt like?"

Like she could forget. Warm and cozy, like everything was going to be right with the world. Like one day the kits' roughhousing had been a little *too* rough, and she'd thought she'd smelled blood-

No. No way. "Katara. Everybody knows earth doesn't-"

"Everybody knew fire didn't," Katara said bluntly. "You're the strongest earthbender I know." She dragged Aang into reach. "Try."

Aang's bruised hand in hers, Toph froze. "I don't know what to do. I don't know where to start."

"Yue showed me. I *was* an earth-healer, in the vision," Katara said softly. "Before Chin came to kill us... You have to tune yourself. To the earth, and the body."

"Right." Sokka had that figuring-it-out tone in his voice. "They love music!"

Music. Purring's music. Kinda. Clay wrapped around her fingers, Toph tried for that felt-and-heard rumble, so like the shift in her head she used to handle jumping unhurt among crashing rocks. She could feel the earth in metal, maybe she could feel it in people too-

Oh.

It was *tiny*. Tiny tiny; no wonder Katara had been half-convinced it wasn't there when Zuko had showed her stuff. Aang was a tangle of vibrations against her hands. Most of them felt okay, but the ones right under her fingers...

Off. Just a little.

Reaching through the shimmer of clay, she tugged them back into rhythm.

"...Ack," Sokka managed.

Toph dropped shaking hands, feeling like she'd just chucked half a mountain at somebody. "Did - did I get it?"

"Yeah." Aang sounded amazed and happy and like the world had gotten kicked out from under him, all at once. "You got it."

Mad, Toph realized, listening to what lay under the *wow* in his voice. *He's mad at me. Why?*

"We all used to heal," Katara said, stunned herself. "Sozin hunted down fire-healers. Chin got the earth-healers. And... someone called Xiangchen was after the air-healers." She gulped. "If the Avatar has to master every element, but part of our bending is *gone*..."

"Xiangchen?" Aang said in a very small voice.

"You know about the guy?" Sokka pounced.

"No!" Aang said, too quickly. "I mean, Gyatso told me about our Xiangchen. But he isn't the same guy. He was a hero!"

The Fire Nation calls Sozin a hero, Toph almost said. But kept her mouth shut, thinking. Aang just didn't get mad, most of the time. Unless it was Appa. Or Katara.

Only this is quieter. Like when Chief Hakoda told him to stop waterbending people when he didn't know what he was doing-

Oh. *Oh*. That was *it*. Aang was a master airbender. Said so himself. And he picked up other bending moves like breathing.

Only if Katara was right, there was a part of airbending he *didn't know*.

Like Azula didn't know you could toss back lightning.

And if Sparky was right - and it was a little scary, sometimes, how right Zuko was about Aang - the Avatar was a *lot* like Azula. An expert. A prodigy. Everything was *easy* for him.

So what's Azula do, when something's not easy?

They hadn't stuck around to hear the aftermath of Zuko's lightning-toss. But Toph would bet it wasn't pretty.

"A hero?" Katara's voice smiled, but there was something uncertain in it. "What did he do?"

"He made sure no one's hands got pierced, ever again," Aang said firmly.

"Hands pierced?" Sokka gulped.

"I saw it on a scroll," Aang said seriously. "I don't know the tribe's name. I don't think they're around anymore. But I saw pictures. They hauled people off with ropes through their *hands*. They had bows, and awful arrows, and even used some kind of burning oil... maybe they were related to the Yu Yan. Only I don't think they could be, Gyatso said that tribe was so ashamed by

Xiangchen's peacefulness that they gave up their bows *forever*." A wistful smile crept into his voice. "Wouldn't it be great if the Fire Nation did that?"

"No!"

Toph blinked, surprised Sokka and Katara had joined in. *This should be good.*

"Don't you dare," Sokka said firmly. "Kyoshi *already* messed with them. That's the problem." He snorted. "Besides. You've seen Zhao. And Zuko. If they couldn't fight *somebody*, they'd probably spontaneously combust."

"And you're not making me hunt down someone who can't fight back," Katara said grimly.

"I'm not making you go after him at all!" Aang protested. "You don't have to. Your dad says the Fire Lord comes *first*."

"We have to get to the Fire Lord, first." Katara shifted, uncertain. "Aang. Don't you want to know about your own healers?"

Wind brushed Toph's face as Aang flung up his hands. "What do healers have to do with revenge?"

"...Nothing, I guess."

Not nothing, Toph realized. *The elements balance. Mend, and break. Sokka says Southern waterbenders fought and healed; up North, they split 'em. And Asiavik and everybody think the Fire Nation went crazy 'cause they lost their healers, and just had warriors left. And all the Earth Kingdom's got is warriors, and people who bend to do other stuff. So we're off balance too. And the Air Nomads lost their healers, and we know they don't fight-*

No. No, they didn't know that at *all*. Everybody in the Fire Nation fought. *Everybody*. And the *yamabushi* weren't up just any mountain. They were in *Byakko*.

Mend and break. There were airbenders who healed. There had to be ones who fight.

Zuko did both. Katara did both. And if Katara wanted to tell Aang about air-healers, but *didn't* want to tell him everything... *Oh, not good.*

Well. Time to put Aang's rabbiroo mind to good use. "So you saw Yue?" Toph asked.

"Was she okay?" Sokka jumped in. "And don't say she was the Moon."

"Well, she was," Katara said ruefully. "She showed me something Yugoda didn't teach us. I think... it helps keep us from bending other people's feelings." Fur wrapped around her, she stood. "It works like this..."

Chapter End Notes

"Steal Polar Bear's Fur", is actually "High Pat On Horse". I once ran across a tale of a woman stealing white hairs from the moon-bear's chest to cure her husband from war-sickness, and the move looked right for that.

Betobeto - in Japanese folklore, the betobeto-san is a spirit that makes the sound of

footsteps following you.

Bakezōri - a straw zōri sandal which has been transformed into a tsukumogami, a yōkai (spirit creature) which was once an ordinary household item. It runs through the house and chants "kararin, kororin, kankororin!" Translations on this vary. I've found a few sources that say kororin refers to the sound of something tumbling. Others say it means "Eyes three, Eyes three and teeth two!"

In case anyone's wondering... in this AU, Zuko, the Gaang, and the entire Avatar world are smack in the middle of a Thirty Xanatos Pileup. And historically, every nation has been caught in its gears. *Twice*.

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Warning, Azula in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Strop. Strop. Hisssss...

Tingzhe looked up from the latest cache scroll he'd been examining, still a bit dazed by just how much the Dai Li had been sitting on for centuries. He couldn't speak for the other elements, but there were earthbending forms here he'd never seen in all his decades as a teacher, and if some of these were what they hinted to be-

Focus, he told himself. *Something's not right.*

The shelter was still intact around them; not an inconsequential thing, given Meixiang was right to tease him about ignoring little things like walls crumbling in the midst of his studies. He'd once had an entire half-demolished building come down on top of him while he was excavating, and only noticed that he'd shunted everything casually away when it was suddenly too dark to read.

Of course, given Meixiang had been in the excavation with him, he'd shortly become very distracted indeed.

"Tingzhe." A breath against him as she shivered in the darkness, shut away from sunlight. "There's something I have to tell you..."

He shook away the memory of shock. He *knew*, now. And so did their children. No more hiding.

Hmm. No problem with Shirong and Jinhai, still meditating with their single candles off to one side, hidden from casual passersby behind rock screens. His youngest had been a bit giggly about showing a Dai Li what to do, but the boy seemed to have settled down now. For a firebender, meditation was evidently serious business.

Near, but out of range of the occasional flare, Jia and Suyin were wrestling with some of his historical accounts of earthbender strike teams, comparing rescues in the text to the rough sketch in their sand-tray of the smuggled map of where Min was. Huojin was sitting with them, bemused, adding his own observations of Guard operations in a low tone. Sitting by the stone screening the entryway, Luli was reading stories to Lim and Daiyu before bed, another layer of warning in case someone barged in who didn't know about the firebenders inside...

Ah. There. Jia, glancing at her mother out of the corner of her eye as Meixiang put the finishing touches on another knife to slip up her sleeve.

Not something we're used to. Any of us. "How sharp do you need to make those?" Tingzhe asked, curious.

"Not as sharp as a fine chef's blade," Meixiang said plainly. "It's a balance. You want them to go through flesh, but given their size, it's just as well if they slide across bone instead of cutting it."

"Um," Jia said faintly. "Is it okay if I say, ewww?"

"Of course it is." Meixiang smiled sadly. "We don't want to hurt people. We just want to be safe." She eyed the newly-edged blade. "And I want my son back. Whole."

And I rather don't care how many pieces I leave someone else in to do it, Tingzhe agreed silently. And had to put the scroll down, staring at nothing at all.

"Tingzhe?" Meixiang crossed the room to sit by him, rubbing her knuckles along the ridge of his cheekbone to ease some of the building headache. "What's wrong?"

I'm not sure what our family is anymore. What I am. And what I may be becoming. "Perhaps I should spend some time meditating myself," he admitted, trying to keep his tone light. "I'm a bit... upset."

"An enemy has our Min," Meixiang said simply. "Do you think Earth doesn't get angry?"

"I lost Yijiao on the Wall years ago," Tingzhe objected. "This... it's different."

"Yijiao was your brother, and a soldier. Min is our son," Meixiang said plainly. "He was supposed to be training. He was supposed to be *safe*. We all were." She rubbed his back, leaning her shoulder against his. "Of course you're angry. Use it. Don't let it use you."

"I've..." Tingzhe shook his head, pride aching. "I've no idea how." Oma and Shu, that was hard to admit. He was a civilized, educated man. He knew history and all its ancient battles, how to deduce a smithy or a flower-shop from shards centuries old. But this? To know all the paper battles he'd refought in his own mind were about to become a small, bloody reality...

"Start by leaning on the experts, Professor." Huojin gave him a wry smile, still haunted by the Guards he'd had to leave behind. "Shirong's good at this, or he wouldn't be alive. And from what he says, Mai is scary enough to almost do this herself. Listen to them, and listen to us. And *ask*. What do you always tell your students, there are no stupid questions?" The Guard nodded. "We'll get him back."

"We will," Meixiang agreed. "He's Gyokuro's great-grandson. Even at this remove, Agni will watch over him."

"Gyokuro?" Suyin looked interested. As well she might be. Meixiang almost never spoke of her family tree, or mentioned names. Fire Nation names, no less.

"He was a Fire Sage," Meixiang nodded. "When my family was listed... he's the one who smuggled me out. And sent me here." She smiled sadly. "He didn't want me to cry. He said it was his destiny, to serve the Avatar."

"Because the Fire Sages are *so* in touch with the spirits," Shirong grumbled, candle flickering.

Tingzhe gave him a look askance. "You're supposed to be--"

"I know, I know. But when you start mentioning Avatars, I can't avoid listening. Self-preservation." The Dai Li cast a glance at Meixiang. "Seriously, honored elder sister. I know the Fire Nation holds a grudge against the Avatar, Kyoshi in specific. I don't know *why*, but you'd think someone really in touch with the spirits would know there's no way this war could ever be justified--"

Tingzhe winced.

"...You know something."

"I know there are gaps in our history," Tingzhe said honestly. "There are reports of the *waegu* and Water Tribe piracy before and after Chin's time. Then, about three hundred and twenty years ago, the attacks all but cease. Suddenly. At the same time, there's a suspicious scarcity of court records. Those that remain, in relation to Avatar Kyoshi, have a tone I might best describe as shocked. In the more moral of the counselors. Those that my research indicates were not... seem rather smug." He paused. "I also know that prying too deeply into whatever happened earned a stark warning to leave the past buried. Those who ignored that warning - well." He gave the agent a pointed look.

"You don't know," Meixiang said quietly. "I'd heard all the Earth Kingdom knew."

"They might," Luli stated. "We don't."

Tingzhe felt the weight of eyes on him, and bent his head in acknowledgement. "I was younger, and far more reckless, when I first knew there were facts missing from our history. Then... we had children, and I didn't want to pry into what might be best left resting in peace."

"Then you need to know. Suyin?" Meixiang nodded toward Amaya's side of the shelter. "Would you go see if Amaya's done for the night?"

"You only want to tell it once?" Huojin raised a brow as Suyin headed that way.

"I'll tell it as many times as I need to," Meixiang said steadily, stirring Jinhai from his meditation with a few whispers. "But if she truly is serious about Mushi... she should know the weight his family bears. For all of us."

A curious Water Tribe healer followed Suyin back, and Tingzhe sealed the doorway against casual listeners.

Meixiang let everyone get settled, and drew a breath. "This is the story as it was told to me..."

Some time later, Tingzhe held his children in numb shock. *That was... spirits...*

"You're saying, for over two hundred years..." Huojin was glassy-eyed, as Luli cuddled their girls.

"The Fire Nation begged to have the ruling rescinded," Meixiang said quietly. "It's said that as prince, Fire Lord Zouge, Sozin's father, went to plead before Kyoshi herself in her fading years." She shook her head. "A great name, forced to beg. The indignity must have whipped Sozin's soul like chains of ice."

"No way to take revenge for your people," Amaya said, voice bleak. "Tui and La."

"But why didn't he just ask Roku?" Luli spoke up. "You said they were friends."

"Avatar Roku would not return from his training for Fire Lord Zouge's funeral," Meixiang said bluntly.

Shirong made a sudden, strangled noise of comprehension. And buried his face in his hands.

Tingzhe traded looks of confusion with the other adults. "I suppose that could be considered an insult, but..."

"Oh, the insult is the least of it." Shirong looked up, eyes glittering with anger. "Spirits. And loyalty. You don't understand what Kyoshi *did*."

"She made them swear loyalty to the Fire Lord." Huojin was pale. "And... breaking loyalty can *kill* you."

"And usually does, without a fire-healer," Meixiang stated. "Mai is lucky, and strong. And not a firebender." She shook her head. "You have no idea how many died defying Sozin. I wouldn't know, if Gyokuro hadn't kept the tale for our family. It is not in our history books."

There were firebenders who didn't want the war. Tingzhe held his children close. "Why didn't they simply leave?" he asked, voice tight. "Not disobey. Just... avoid the command. Lee did-"

"No. He didn't," Shirong said harshly. "He was exiled, with orders to find and capture the Avatar. Hiding in Ba Sing Se so *his own army* wouldn't kill him while he tried to do that - that was *not* disloyal. Not quite."

"...I don't understand," Tingzhe admitted.

"The Avatar is the bridge between our world and the spirits," Shirong stated. "I didn't really understand what that meant until Kuei... well, you saw. If the Earth King can enforce a judgment on Wan Shi Tong himself, what do you think the *Avatar* can do?"

Tingzhe felt a bit faint. "So Avatar Kyoshi's decree..."

"Any Fire Nation citizen who goes against the Fire Lord's authority is defying the will of the spirits," Shirong said bluntly. "They'd have as much of a target on their backs as any scarred Dai Li. Oma and Shu, it's no wonder you're all here. Without constant protection from malice, you'd never survive." He chuckled, without humor. "No wonder the war doesn't hit them with ill luck for what they've done to our kingdom. *They're following the Avatar's orders.*"

Tingzhe drew breath to protest; the war had started after *Roku's* death, and there was no way Avatar Kyoshi would have *ordered* the Fire Nation to attack her own people-

Let it go, a lifetime of examining history forcing him to scrutinize his own logic. Even if he hated it.

They must follow the Fire Lord. He orders the war to continue. They have no choice.

Besides choose to run. And risk everything.

"You see, the funeral was the key," Shirong remarked into the aching silence. "It's customary for the great names to attend, or at least send proxies, to affirm that they've set aside loyalty to the dead Fire Lord to attend to the living one. If Roku *was* a friend - I doubt Sozin would have been allowed to associate with many youngsters who weren't great names. If Roku thought his training as the Avatar was more important than showing loyalty to Sozin..." He sighed. "So much of the Fire Nation is wrapped up in what they *don't say*. If Roku would not show loyalty to Sozin, then by default, he was claiming his loyalty to Fire Lord Zouge was more important. And Zouge's request had *already* been refused by Kyoshi." He smiled ruefully. "Sozin was a murderer and a monster and a plague on our kingdom. But I think... I would have given up then, too."

"Oh," Huojin managed. "Oh, *that's* what he meant, that slippery catfish-eel... Mushi got out of swearing to Ozai," he explained at Luli's raised brow. "He broke his loyalty to Azulon and *lived*, Agni only knows how - and he got out of giving it again!" He flung up frustrated hands. "He's been loose for *six years!*"

"From the Fire Lord," Amaya said somberly. "Not the Fire Nation. And he had Lee to look after. Who *is* loyal, though since his exile Mushi has been moving with care to strengthen Lee's loyalty to

his people, so he could survive..." Blue eyes widened.

"So he has," Shirong breathed. "Oh, that *genius* son of a-" He laughed, full of startled joy. "No wonder we haven't been caught!"

"Dad?" Jia muttered under her breath. "Is it just me, or has he completely lost it?"

"Jia," Meixiang groaned.

"No, no. She's right. It *is* crazy." Still laughing, Shirong wiped away tears. "A *wonderful* crazy, upside-down and backwards and breaking everything into pieces... And I don't know if it's Agni or just Lee, any kid who's chased the Avatar across the world is more than any spirit should count on..." He looked up, eyes bright. "Lee's an *exile*. Sozin's blood, yes; and that will bring malicious spirits down on his head whether he's chasing the Avatar or not. But Kyoshi's decree *can't touch him*."

Tingzhe frowned. "I imagine that would be useful for him..."

Meixiang was smiling at him. "We're home."

I'm definitely missing something. "We haven't left Ba Sing Se," Tingzhe pointed out.

"He has a point," Shirong said dryly. "Great name or not, Lee can't set up a domain inside the city."

"He already has," Meixiang said ruefully. "Great names hold territory, yes... but the *domain* is the people."

Shirong clapped a hand to his face. "I am so doomed."

Luli gave them an urchin's look of innocence. "Why? Just because you tried to recruit a firebender, helped kidnap the Earth King, and now you're helping us plan to skate Fire Nation refugees who happen to be our families right out from under the Avatar's power?"

"...So doomed..."

"Will that work?" Huojin asked, skeptical. "Some of you - us - were *ordered* to go. Doesn't that still mean you're loyal to the old lords?"

"And bound in spirit," Amaya nodded, sober.

"Lee is of Byakko. There aren't many older lords," Meixiang said levelly. "And he has enough dragon blood to fall prey to the rage. He can shield us. And with fire-healers... any who suffer will at least have a chance."

"Only fire?" Tingzhe mused.

"Water can't help," Amaya said sadly. "It's the fire in your spirits that bleeds. Water only worsens it."

Tingzhe nodded thoughtfully. "What about earth?"

All eyes fixed on him.

All but Jia's, who had picked up his discarded scroll and was now tracing characters with a look of stunned awe. "Is this what I *think* it is?"

"What?" Shirong frowned.

"One of the scrolls from your cache," Tingzhe informed him. "A rather neglected one, from the looks of it. Given the content, I can't imagine why, unless it doesn't work..." He trailed off at Shirong's bewildered look. "The scroll Jia's holding?"

"...She has a scroll?"

Tingzhe blinked.

Amaya didn't, moving in with a water-wrapped hand swift as a striking scorpion-viper. "Stay *still*."

Showing more iron will than Tingzhe would have believed possible, Shirong did.

Amaya concentrated; eyes closed, lips writhing into a snarl. "*There* you are." Drawing away water tinged with an oily shimmer, she held it as a globe in one cupped hand. "Jinhai. Burn this."

"But - your hand," the little boy protested.

"I'll heal. Burn it!"

"She wouldn't ask if it weren't crucial." Hand on his son's shoulder, Tingzhe nodded.

Wide-eyed and shaking, Jinhai cast a flow of flame.

Amaya set her jaw and held sizzling water, even as her skin reddened and blistered. Held, muttering quiet, angry prayers to the Moon and Ocean, until every last drop burned away.

Only then did she let her hand fall, tears seeping as Suyin scrambled to help her with her waterskin.

"I'm sorry," Jinhai whispered, clinging to Tingzhe as water glowed and the stench of burnt skin faded.

"Fire purifies," Amaya said somberly. "I don't think I would have been able to cleanse that alone."

"What was that?" Shirong was standing his ground, barely; eyes wide as saucers.

"A spirit's influence," the healer said grimly. "Like that fox's touch on Tingzhe, but more hidden. And darker... catch him!"

Tingzhe found himself the center of the mob supporting Shirong as the agent shivered. "What is it?"

"I *remember*..." Shirong blinked, dazed. "I *have* seen that scroll before. I must have tried to read it a dozen times. I just... kept forgetting." He rubbed his head. "How much is *in* that cache?"

"We'll have to inventory it all," Tingzhe agreed. "But for now - Amaya? *Is* it a healing scroll?"

"It certainly appears to be," she breathed, as Jia spread it open for her. "We'll have to test it."

"How could we lose something that important?" Shirong burst out. "The lives that could have been saved, the misery...."

"Bending is easy," Luli mused. "Healing - that's hard."

"That doesn't even make any sense!"

"More sense than you think," Huojin said practically. "Healing... it's sort of at right angles to bending, right?"

"A counterintuitive use of chi," Amaya nodded. "Instinctive bending is meant to protect yourself, like slapping away a violent hand. Healing is giving some of your own energy away. Like Lee teaching the children to relax to fall. The only instinctive healers I've heard of were tide-touched, and who learns earthbending from the badger-moles anymore? The rest of us have to be taught."

"Can you teach me?" Jia burst out. Saw their looks of surprise, and blushed. "Well, manners aren't going to get Min back! And even thinking about fighting makes me all queasy." She gulped. "But I want to help."

"That's my girl," Tingzhe said softly, as Suyin grinned and hugged her sister. Jia rolled her eyes, but didn't push away.

I should stop worrying, Tingzhe told himself, Jinhai warmly nestled in his arms as Meixiang drew them all back together. Even Shirong, awkward as the man still was with his new clan. *We may not be what we were. But I believe we're going to be fine.*

Shirong drew back, a hint of a smirk on his face. "Don't be so quick to assume manners won't make a difference. Guards, walls, Dai Li; everything we have to get past is tied to one enemy."

Tingzhe nodded, eyes narrowed. "Princess Azula."

Threaten my boy, will you? He glanced up towards the cavern ceiling, and the sleeping city above. *We'll see about that.*

Dawn, and a bowl of hot water glared obstinately at her, steaming. Azula glared back, coils of steam rising from her breath as she dressed for the day. "Move, curse you!"

Rising from water, a bubble popped.

How did Zuko do this?

And what had the Dragon of the West kept hidden, that had let Zuko learn?

"His tea-bending kookiness," Azula muttered to herself, fixing her hair into strict, utilitarian perfection. "The man studied *waterbenders*. Agni only knows why."

After all, what was the point of studying a way of life destined to become extinct? Fire was superior. The world knew it.

And those who didn't know, would be ground under armored treads.

Still. If the man had learned something *useful*, he should have said something. To a loyal, strong firebender. Not her weak idiot of a brother.

"Unless he's been planning treachery since he first left Ba Sing Se," Azula mused to the mirror. Now, that would make sense. Vanishing for months, with some stupid story that he'd been on a spiritual quest when he did pop back up? And only a few firebenders could master lightning in the first place. Why hide that he knew a counter, unless he had plans against her father?

Never. You'll never touch him, Uncle. He is the Fire Lord, and I am his heir. And I am loyal.

Not like Zuko. Never like Zuko.

Claiming he'd turned traitor to *protect* her. How stupid did he think she was?

Mom asked him to protect you.

Right. As if she *needed* protecting.

As if Ursa would have even asked him. Her mother thought she was a monster. Who'd protect a monster?

...Besides a certain dead idiot.

I served the Fire Lord, loyally. I am the heir now. Everything I've worked for, for ten years, is finally in my grasp.

Excelling at her studies as her dread father wished. Befriending Mai, whose family were not benders but still held power in the court; partly by guile and true skill at governing, partly by the whispered prestige of Roku's heritage. Befriending Ty Lee, daughter of a chi-blocking family crucial to destroying assassins and maintaining order in the prisons. Subtly twisting the girl to her will over the years, shaping the most useful of tools to ensure her blockhead of a brother could never, ever be a threat to her position as favored child. As her father had always, silently, made clear that he *was* - if only because to be lacking an enemy might lure her to be less than the best, and Prince and then Fire Lord Ozai would *never* accept less than perfection.

Poor Zuko. He'd only survived that Agni Kai because Ozai *wanted* him to. Exiled, barely existing, banished to do the impossible... and always a reminder of the fate she must be clever enough, quick enough, *ruthless* enough to avoid.

Really, Father. As if I would ever disgrace Sozin's line with less than my best performance.

...*Can't you trust me?*

Silly thought. A Fire Lord trusted no one. Avatar Kyoshi had handed them the power to remake the world... yet even now, centuries later, there were great names who would gladly see all that power go down in ashes and ruin. Who would forgo revenge, and yes, even the self-defense necessary to be certain the world would never, ever ravage the Fire Nation again. *If* they dared.

Traitors, all of them.

Traitors who to this day sent men and materials to the war effort, praying to be allowed in turn to protect their domains. So her father left them in place. For now.

She'd taken Ba Sing Se without a single soldier. What great name would defy her now?

Use my victory, Father. To your glory - and crush them all!

She'd have to maintain the Dai Li recruitment program. Fire was superior, but loyal servants to bury your enemies alive were too good a tool to let rust out of existence. Especially considering what *else* she might need to use them against.

Spirits. In broad daylight. Attacking me.

What an uncivilized place!

That debacle in the audience chamber would *never* have happened in the Fire Nation. Fire Sages *handled* these matters.

...Then again, Ba Sing Se was unimaginably larger than the capital, and the Dai Li had been a bit distracted.

I'll have to order some Sages assigned here. That should prevent any other fiascos... and demonstrate the benefits of accepting our rule. She smiled slightly. *Tend a komodo-rhino, and it will draw any load. Even sausages.*

A truth learned at her father's knee. Which made its failure with Mai all the more frustrating. What had she not done, to make the girl risk her life breaking loyalty? She'd nurtured Mai with smiles and discipline. Made it subtly clear to the court that Mai's family was in her favor. Encouraged the girl's interest in Zuko with subtle hints and a bit of fire-play for her brother to "rescue" Mai from. And terrified exactly the right people to cover up that Momiji and Ilah had been sisters.

Fraternal descent, her people wouldn't have balked at. Or if they'd been brother and sister; with at least three generations between them, that was perfectly safe. *Sororal* descent... Azula clicked her tongue in disappointment. She'd seen the Fire Sages' records of the monstrosities possible when that happened.

Oh, not physical monsters. *Beautiful* children. The strongest of firebenders, yet all too often... missing something. According to the Fire Sages. Dried-up old coots. What in the world was wrong with having firebenders who didn't weep over stupid animals? Weakness should be *crushed*, not coddled.

She'd *so* looked forward to Zuzu's face when she finally told him. Right before she took his children.

Ah well. One half of that equation was dead, but Mai did have a little brother. Perhaps she could just *borrow* him, once she'd produced a legitimate heir.

And here was the would-be traitor herself, bearing message scrolls. Just as if it were any other morning. "Which of these should I see before breakfast?" Azula asked, arching one elegant brow. Pretend, pretend; they were all pretending, and wasn't it fun?

If it weren't, she'd burn Mai down on the spot. *No one* betrayed her.

"The top one might be funny," Mai deadpanned. "I think Earth Kingdom messengers have more brains than their generals."

Intrigued despite herself, Azula unrolled an account of a courier, identified as one of General Gang's, who had headed for Ba Sing Se so fast he'd almost run right into the middle of a Fire Army encampment. *Before* he'd noticed the Wall was down.

In between the lines of the formal report, you could all but hear the girly shriek.

Pursuit initiated, first hidden remount station located and marked, currently leaving in place while we fix and prepare to destroy next stations on the route, Azula skimmed out of the rest of the report. Good. An *intelligent* officer. The chase could be left in his hands, for now.

Though she did wonder what Gang had wanted out of Ba Sing Se. More supplies? Or something more critical?

We have the city. Whatever they wanted, it's out of their reach.

Out of habit, she rifled through Mai's pile, looking for whatever had been buried as unimportant. Mai couldn't really lie to her, but it was always good to keep in practice...

Well. Well, well, well. Perhaps she should reevaluate Mai's skill at lying. " *Suzuran* anticipates making port here tomorrow?"

"So?" Mai shrugged. "It's a supply ship. I thought you had plenty of supplies."

"It's a dumping ground for malcontents and incompetents," Azula stated, watching her closely. "Assigned to minesweeping duty."

"They must be pretty good at finding them, to get here," Mai said dryly. "Or pretty bad."

Not a flinch from the knife-thrower. Could she really not know? "You might know their captain, Jee."

Mai frowned. "From where?"

Interesting. So. Tell her, and lay an obvious snare? Or let it go, and make the girl work for her treachery?

I'll have her one way or another. Let's make it amusing. "Oh, just one of those discipline problems the Fire Lord means to make an example of. Whenever certain laggards in our government get restless." She snorted. "A pity I can't make an example out of that Guard station. *Damn* that sergeant."

"For reporting a potential insurgency?" Mai's eyes didn't even crinkle in a hint of smile.

"For the way he did it," Azula said in disgust. "I don't have to check the records; that man *must* have served with my idiot uncle. If I burn that weevil-rat hole down the way it deserves, he'd be standing right in the way of the flames. Fool." Her eyes narrowed. "What was Father thinking, leaving Zuko in *his* hands?"

"That he liked you best," Mai said levelly. "And that the only way the court would accept him training you to rule was if somebody at least looked like they were training Zuko. One crown prince to teach the next." She shrugged, gold eyes glinting hard before fading back into the mask of apathy. "The crown prince who didn't fight Ozai for the throne, because he knew he'd lose. That's what the rumors said. No one would have been surprised if Zuko went the same way."

Azula smiled, remembering how many of those rumors she'd spread herself. "It's always good to have a backup plan." Lazily, she glanced at Mai. "So how would you lure these traitors out?"

"I wouldn't," Mai said flatly. "This isn't like New Ozai. They're not an Earth resistance, who love hiding out underground. They're Fire Nation. And they're mad. They won't wait forever. Have the Dai Li watch, and wait for the fireworks."

Reasonable. Plausible.

...Oh, it was going to be so much *fun* crushing them all.

Though she'd have to wait on crushing Tu and his little network until after Mai made her move. Wouldn't want to miss any of those. Tu *was* a citizen of the Earth Kingdom, if his records were accurate. And they were - or he had some of the best fakes she'd ever seen. How on earth had Mai known to contact him?

Asking that will be very, very amusing.

The only way this could get more entertaining was if Mai thought she was clever enough to get

Suzuran's help. Jee was a cowed, beaten man; no one else would take orders from her brother without a fight.

A pity Zuko was already in the Earth Kingdom before the anniversary, this year.

After all, what kind of sister would she be to let such an important event pass without commemoration? Nothing said *you are not forgotten* like attempted mutiny.

Though pulling her present off this time around might have been a bit trickier. She doubted Uncle had caught on that these were *officially ordered* mutinies, but he had managed to call in a few favors from the Navy for their latest crew. It'd taken her weeks to even get her hands on the crew records, much less set up the necessary leverage.

And then Zhao had smashed her careful plans to bits with one vainglorious invasion. Honestly. How was she supposed to be properly efficient with so many idiots in the way?

At least the man had had the bare decency to lose himself in that fiasco. Good riddance. One less idiot to derail the march of their empire.

Two less, now, she smirked. *And soon to be more.*

So. Breakfast, occupation duties, and plotting. And then, water *would* bend to her will. One way, or another.

Land. It was all Toph could do not to kiss it at odd moments. No rocking. No rolling. No meal-stealing nausea from water that just wouldn't stay still. No *blindness*.

"Augh!"

And on top of that, she got to kick Aang's butt. Didn't get much better.

Toph cracked her knuckles, then cracked the ground that had trapped Aang up to his nose when he'd stepped wrong. "Watching my hands again, huh?"

Aang scrambled out, then leapt skyward with a yelp as more seemingly solid layers crumbled into badger-mole tunnels. "You did all that with your *feet*?"

"Toes," the earthbender said simply, using them to smooth the rest of the ground solid as Katara and Sokka walked closer to the danger zone. Felt an interested little jig a few feet behind them, and barely kept the grin off her face. The *betobeto* might drive people up a wall most of the time, but it seemed to have enough good sense to back off when the bending started. Which meant Aang wasn't just practicing 'til he got bored anymore. He'd practice 'til he *thought* he was bored. Then he'd take a break, chase a flutter-hornet or Momo or who knew what, flop down, hear footsteps - and all of a sudden get interested in lessons all over again.

Next time she caught Sparky, she *had* to hug him.

Not that Toph was going to let on about *that*. Why spoil a good thing?

Think I'm gonna call it Boots, Toph decided. "Don't watch *me*, Twinkletoes," she said firmly. "Watch the ground. Feel it. You feel the air, right?"

"How can anybody not feel air?" Aang touched down, feather-light. "Everybody has to breathe."

"Except when they're diving after turtle-seals," Sokka muttered, too low for anyone else to hear.

Toph frowned, wishing she'd been a little less sick and a little more listening when Chief Hakoda had asked them to take Appa and head inland for a while. But about all she'd been up to at the time was adding her nauseated vote to Hakoda's and Sokka's about staying *away from people*.

Aang was having a hard time with the idea of "the world thinks you're dead". Wanted to head back, try to bust up Ba Sing Se, and get himself zapped by Azula again. Well, *tough*. As Sokka had pointed out, a *bunch* of times, they didn't know exactly how long an eclipse lasted. They needed every edge they could get. Including letting the Fire Nation think they could breathe easy.

How long that would last, Toph had no idea.

Sparky doesn't want us dead. But he's got a volcano of a temper, and he knows Aang's teamed up with the Water Tribes. And he thinks they're gonna kill his people.

On top of that, Zuko was living proof he was willing to risk it all to make things right. And what Zuko thought was right... well, it sure didn't match up with Aang's idea of right.

So what's he gonna do?

She didn't know. And that made Toph worried. Zuko didn't just face the impossible. He stood his ground when it barreled down on him, threw it into a bamboo-thorn thicket, and bashed it over the head. With a rock, if that was all he had. He'd chased the Avatar for half a year. The *Avatar*. When he didn't even think he was a firebending master.

Sure, Aang was a kid. Sure, Aang never tried to kill him. But Aang was an *airbending master*. Anybody sane would have gone down and stayed down.

Zuko wasn't sane. He wasn't seeing-things crazy, and he sure wasn't evil-crazy like Azula, but he was *not* walking on the same ground as everybody else. He was a friend, no doubt about it. And she was gonna kick his butt in the nicest way to get him to *think*. But Toph was never going to make the mistake of thinking Zuko was sane, reasonable, or even human.

Not twice, anyway.

Funny thing was, it didn't bother her. The badger-moles had been better family than her own, sometimes. And Zuko tried really, *really* hard to figure out where her lines in the sand were, and how not to cross them. Crazy, yeah. But he was decent. One of the best.

But he had lines, too. Deep ones. And Aang had just blown through them like they didn't matter.

Do that with a badger-mole, it'd bury you in the mountain or rip you to shreds. Zuko hadn't done either.

Fire needs revenge. So... whatever he's up to, it's gonna hurt Aang worse.

Darn it. If only they'd had a few more days to talk. She could have gotten that plan out of Uncle eventually, she just knew it. At least she could have maybe gotten Zuko to talk more about the Dai Li, those earth shoes just might be a good idea in some places-

"But I don't want to fight you!" Aang protested.

Sokka was hefting his boomerang, stance set and determined. "I'm not saying we have to fight. I just want you to practice making sure Boomerang doesn't hit you."

"It's not like the Fire Nation *uses* boomerangs."

"Yeah, well, I haven't got arrows to shoot at you," Sokka said, sounding even less happy about it than Aang. "You said those Yu Yan caught you, right?"

"Oh, yeah." Aang shook his head, amazement shivering from his toes. "I knew some people in the Fire Nation were archers; Kuzon snuck away with me to see some, once. Whoa, did he ever get in trouble for that! But I never saw anybody shoot like that, *ever*."

"So why haven't we ever seen them chasing us again?" Sokka asked, pointedly.

Silence.

Aang gulped. "Come on, Sokka, they know that didn't work-"

"They know somebody in a mask broke you out after you were captured," Sokka said bluntly.

"That's not exactly a *didn't work*."

"We're using the eclipse so they won't firebend!" Aang protested.

"And Zuko broke you out *without firebending*," Sokka shot back. "They fight, Aang. They teach *everybody* to fight. Yeah, we're hitting them during the eclipse. Yeah, they won't have fire. Mai and Ty Lee ring a bell? No fire? Doesn't exactly stop them."

"It's just in case," Katara jumped in. "Just practice making Boomerang go somewhere Sokka didn't aim it." A shift of her weight, looking toward Toph. "You've been working so hard on earthbending..."

Not as hard as Toph would *like*, but - yeah. This would work. "Good idea," Toph agreed. "Work with air some. Get all loosened up." She slapped a fist into her palm. "So I can grind you into the boulders, later."

"Sometimes, Toph? You scare me," Sokka muttered. Slung an arm over Aang's shoulders, heading back to where Appa and Momo were doing their best to strip a thorny bush of fruit. "Now, the thing to remember is, Boomerang *always* comes back..."

Katara shifted her weight to watch them go, and sighed. "We need to talk."

"This have anything to do with why you're not pushing Aang to figure out air-healing?" Toph said wryly. Tapped her toes on the ground, inviting Boots to hang around them, instead of pestering Aang while sharp things were flying at his head. *Save that for later*.

"I don't see you trying to get him to work on that with earth," Katara said pointedly.

"Don't think so," Toph shrugged, feeling silent tippy-taps sneaking up behind Katara. Not that she thought the spirit was out to trip Katara; not this time. Long as it was daylight, it seemed to stick to just sneaking. Unless Aang acted like he was forgetting about it, at which point Boots got pushy as an overfed cat-owl.

"I'm a rumble fighter," Toph went on. "I hit things, they stay down. Healing? I don't have a clue. If somebody's so hurt it's me or nothing, I'll try it. Anything else, I'm calling you. Or Asiavik." *Or better yet, Sparky. If I can get him*. "Know what I think we should do? Find some nice guy earthbender who wants to help people. I can get him started, and *he* can figure it out. Not sure I ever will. I like messing people up too much."

"Haru," Katara blurted out.

Toph rocked back a little, surprised. "You know somebody?"

"The earthbenders in his village were all taken away to a Fire Nation prison barge. I... kind of got him captured," Katara admitted. "We set it up so Aang could make me look like an earthbender, and when the Fire Nation took me, Sokka and Aang followed us. We got coal to the prisoners, and they threw all the soldiers overboard." She nodded. "Haru's kind. He got caught because I asked him to help someone. If you showed him, I know he could do it."

"Sounds like a plan," Toph said, relieved. Flicked a finger, sending a stone skating across the ground for Boots to pounce on. "A barge? Is that where you lost your necklace?"

"I think so- That weevil-rat! Did he tell you what he did with it? First he tried to get me to give up Aang for it, then he used it so this big... nose-seeing *thing* with a bounty hunter could smash up a whole abbey..."

"Whoa, easy. Just checking," Toph said plainly. Zuko's version of events had been a little less villainous, but not by much. The firebender had admitted he was tracking down an enemy of the whole Fire Nation. Bribes, bounty hunters, eel-hounding somebody to the ends of the earth? Zuko wasn't exactly proud of any of it, but he'd do it all over again. In a heartbeat.

And... somehow, that poked at her ideas of just what Zuko might do next. If she could only figure out how.

"Anyway." Katara let out an angry huff, calming herself down. "I just... Air Nomads are peaceful. We know that."

"I know what Aang's like," Toph shrugged. "And a few things Iroh and Zuko said. That's about it."

"They were! Gran-Gran told us about them."

"Okay," Toph agreed. "So what's the problem?"

Katara sucked in a breath, probably biting her lip. "Why would a healer carry a sword?"

Oh. Wow.

"Never mind," Katara said impatiently. "It doesn't matter, it must have been a long time ago-"

"Maybe somebody didn't want her getting to the good guys," Toph broke in.

"But she was a bender!"

"Not everybody's got as much chi to throw around as Twinkletoes," Toph said seriously. "Healing takes it out of you. Just fixing up Aang a little - I've come out of rumbles feeling better."

"I know, but..."

Toph waited, letting silence do the work for her.

"Bending is a gift from the spirits," Katara said at last. "If we don't trust the spirits, who are we? Just look at the Fire Nation! All coal and steel and burning down forests and hurting people - ugh!"

Toph frowned.

"Well, they're wrong!"

"Give me a minute," Toph said impatiently. "I'm thinking about it." And not liking everything she was thinking. *I guess I owe Sokka an apology. Maybe a couple.* "Your tribe uses swords. They're made out of whale teeth, but they're still sharp pointy things."

"They have to," Katara said practically. "They're not benders."

Definitely owe Snoozles an apology, Toph decided. "So if Ty Lee got your bending again, you wouldn't use a sword?"

"I wouldn't even be able to move!"

But Zuko could. "Coal burns," Toph said seriously.

"That doesn't have anything to do with the spirits."

"Maybe not water spirits," Toph said impatiently. "You guys use ice for everything. You even make houses out of it. Why can't the Fire Nation use fire?"

"They don't firebend to keep their ships and tanks and *drills* running," Katara brushed it off.

"And your dad doesn't waterbend to keep his ships sailing, either," Toph pointed out.

"You sound like you think what they're doing is right!" Water sloshed in Katara's waterskin. "Well, it's not! It's not fair. It's not what the spirits want. Forget Zuko; none of them have any honor!"

Maybe I should try healing after all, Toph thought sourly, feeling stone skitter back across the ground her way. And *stop*, as Boots felt the chill in the air. *Even if I just end up sneezing dust, it might help the headache.*

Though she couldn't blame Katara for still being mad at Zuko. That letter had been kind of like getting flattened by house-sized hailstones. No way to see it coming, and nothing you could do afterward but pick up the pieces.

...Damn, Sparky was *good*.

Wish I'd been on Kyoshi Island last winter. Could've snagged them all and helped Uncle talk him around.

Well, maybe. Zuko was as stubborn as an earthbender. And he'd probably been a *lot* crankier.

"We're on dry land. If you're so mad you want to run off and leave Aang twisting in the wind with Sokka, I'm right behind you."

"I am not angry at Aang!"

She says, freezing every drop of water in twenty feet, Toph thought wryly.

"...He doesn't care about Mom," Katara whispered at last. "How can he not care? When we found Gyatso's skeleton - he almost blew everything off the mountain. Why..." She hugged herself, chilled. "Why can't he see I feel like that?"

"He didn't have a mom," Toph reminded her. "He had a teacher. He probably thinks you ought to get broken up like that over Pakku. Only Pakku's still alive."

"Pakku?" Katara sputtered.

"He taught you, right? Like you're teaching Aang." And didn't that make her stomach move a bit

queasy, dry land or not. Katara as the teacher Aang had a crush on... she'd overheard stuff like that at the arena, and it never seemed to be good.

"*Pakku?*" Katara repeated, shocked.

"Air." Toph jabbed a finger toward where Boomerang was whirring through the wind, then pointed at Katara. "Water." Jabbed a thumb at herself. "Earth. We're in this together, but we started from different places. That's not wrong. Just the way it is. So we have to work harder to work together? We can do that." She crossed her arms. "First, we win. Then we fix things."

"You sound like Sokka," Katara sighed.

"He's a pretty cool guy, sometimes," Toph admitted. Too bad he'd met Suki first. "So, you need another person for this calm-you-down meditation stuff?"

"I was going to do it with Aang..."

"Do it more with Aang later, when you're already cooled down, so you can show him better," Toph suggested. When Aang would *need* it, given she could feel the whisper-steps of Boots sneaking that way. "Please? I want to feel it. Maybe it'll help me figure out seawater."

"What are you doing with seawater?" Katara asked warily.

Toph grinned.

"And again," Iroh said patiently, hand against hand as he felt his nephew's inner fire wax and wane. He heard a ruffled chirp, but trusted the rest of the crew and Asahi's own good sense to keep the ostrich-horse clear while they practiced. It seemed his intuition had been correct; modifying Amaya's tide-push meditation did give Zuko a better grasp on his fire.

Unfortunately, that still wasn't saying much.

If we had another week, even, to bring it under better control...

But they did not. Iroh drew a breath, and nodded. "Enough."

Zuko stepped back, sweating in the sunlight dappling the rear decks. Though perhaps more in the heat of attentive eyes, Iroh mused, noting with some humor how Zuko tried to avoid the gazes on him. It seemed his nephew had grown used to being overlooked.

"It's still not good enough, is it." Zuko's voice was quiet; not so much resigned, as simply accepting unpleasant fact.

"To pass unnoticed anywhere near Azula? No, it will not be," Iroh said frankly. "But you have passed as a common firebender before. We will simply need to be careful."

Zuko frowned. "She missed me in the palace."

"Oh?" Iroh raised a brow, curious. Either Azula had been unusually distracted, or... "At what distance?"

"Maybe fifteen feet."

Iroh blinked.

"Straight up," Zuko added, reddening a little.

Iroh made himself breathe. And reminded himself that now was *not* the time to chew his entirely too brave nephew out for taking what must have been the best of very bad options. "I would say that was... a bit risky."

"Only if she looked up," Zuko said sheepishly. Shrugged a bit. "I used to do it back- in the capital. It didn't always work at first."

Those marines practicing in earshot weren't even pretending not to listen now, Iroh realized ruefully. He couldn't blame them. To hide from someone with Azula's mastery of inner fire... "How?"

"He didn't want to be found," Sergeant Kyo said dryly. "Right, sir?"

"No one *wants* to be found by my sister, Sergeant," Zuko said wryly.

"Not what I'm talking about," the graying sergeant said plainly. "Do it now."

Zuko frowned. But seemed to settle himself, and breathed out-

Gone.

Brows arched, Iroh searched for the sense of his nephew's fire. The young man was standing right before him. Yet all he could feel was his own fire, the other benders, the sunlight warming the deck-

Sunlight on the deck.

"You have hidden your fire against the warmth around you," Iroh breathed. "How?"

"I... don't know," Zuko admitted, as Asahi stalked over for a scratch, judging practice over. "It's like sticking to shadows. You're the one who gave me the book!"

"Which book?" Iroh inquired. If anyone had said he was a bit wary of the answer, he would have denied it.

"To not be seen, is to be invisible," Zuko quoted.

Waves in Moon-shadow. Iroh didn't - quite - bury his head in his hands. Yes, a fine read for a young child. Full of *waegu* and epic sea battles and young warriors who dared to sneak even into dragon caves...

And Azula had frightened his nephew more than any dragon.

Sergeant Kyo cleared his throat. "Not a bad book to start an *akuma komainu-ko* off on, in my experience." He smiled slightly. "Anyone who can sneak past Private Sukekuni *and* Lieutenant Teruko, while they're looking for him, is doing something right."

Devil lion-puppy. Iroh inclined his head to the marine, amused and grateful. His nephew's startled look at being called a baby marine was *priceless*. "I have always suspected the marines kept a few tactics in reserve," he said mildly.

"Like we say, General, if you can choose what to bring to a fight? Bring a firebender, and a swordsman, and all their friends," the sergeant said wryly. "It's a state of mind. You have to make yourself part of the landscape. Not everybody can pull it off." He shrugged, deliberately casual.

"Besides, that's our job. Sneak in and scare the demons out of the enemy so you ground-pounders can burn them down like a dry field." He looked over them both as Lieutenant Teruko came back down to the deck from consulting with Captain Jee. "Now that the sneaking part's a little more likely..."

"There's not much that can scare Azula," Zuko said honestly, scratching along an interested neck. "She has the Dai Li following her, and they hunt man-eating *kamuiy*. We can surprise them. We might even shock them. We're not going to scare them." He frowned over the lake waters. "Even if we could get in and out without a trace - and Sergeant, I am *never* that lucky - she's going to have a fast ship to chase after us, or she'll hunt down the ground evacuation..."

Lieutenant Teruko almost said something. Iroh held up a hand for silence.

Fingers buried in black feathers, Zuko scowled. "Where are the ferries?"

"I doubt any more refugees will be making use of Full Moon Bay," Iroh observed. "Not with our army within Ba Sing Se's very walls."

"Yes, but *where* are the ferries?" his nephew said impatiently. "The merchant ships, the fishing fleets - some of them ought to be out this far..." Gold eyes narrowed, and Asahi followed his gaze with her own lazy blink. "Lieutenant. You'd make a good pirate."

"Sir?" Teruko said through clenched teeth.

"That sounded a lot better in my head," Zuko said faintly. "I meant-"

"Won't work," Kyo said bluntly. "Not unless you can give us an idea who and what are where in the harbor."

What will not work? Iroh almost asked. But held his tongue. If Zuko had found an answer...

"Yes, I can," Zuko said, half amazed. "You wouldn't believe how I know, Sergeant, but... I know Ba Sing Se's docks. As well as Amaya does." He looked straight at Teruko. "And if we can get under the city, I think I can get willing crews."

She winced, obviously trying not to rub at a headache. "Sir. You're not-"

"No one else can do this, Lieutenant."

"Unfortunately, he is correct," Iroh sighed. "The Earth King would be insulted by one of lesser rank."

"The Earth King, sir?" Kyo raised a brow. "Won't the princess have him by now?"

"She'd keep it quiet if she did. *If* it were up to her," Zuko stated. "Azula's always twenty moves ahead. She knows it'd be better to keep people guessing. If it were up to her, Kuei would be a figurehead right now, the Walls would still be up, and she'd have every Earth Army ordered into range to be obliterated. But it's not."

"My brother favors an open display of victory, especially when it will be most crushing to his enemies' spirits," Iroh agreed, thinking on that short, tetchy, and surprisingly informative message *Suzuran* had received from Master Sergeant Yakume. Information carried almost as much in how it had been written as the text itself; the tone might be barely civil, but the words were as formal as any experienced officer reporting to... well, to a general.

Yakume knows I am on this ship. But I do not think he has told Azula.

At least, he had not at the time of the message. Yakume was an honorable man, but Zuko's sister could be entirely too persuasive.

For his sake and ours, I hope not.

Iroh disliked building plans on hope. Still, whatever Yakume might have let slip, there was no way Azula would believe her brother had survived.

"If Azula doesn't have the Earth King, he's hiding," Zuko went on, letting Asahi press against him. "If he's hiding, there aren't that many people who can hide him. Either he's with our people or they'll know how to find him."

"And if the Earth King's not inclined to be persuaded, sir?" Teruko said bluntly.

Zuko smirked. "Then we ask the captains who they want to take their chances with. After we get far enough from the city, *we'll* let them go."

Azula won't, hung in the air like smoke.

Teruko glanced subtly at her sergeant. Who nodded, ever so slightly.

"All right, let's take this up to the captain," Teruko decided. "It might work, sir. But we're going to need all the details on this harbor we can drag out of your head. Both of you, sir," she added, glancing at Iroh. "I know you must have taken the harbor into account in your siege plans."

Indeed he had. Though he had never seen it until that day on the ferry. "We are at your disposal, Lieutenant." He couldn't help but smile.

"Uncle?" Zuko said warily, an equally suspicious beak suddenly swiveling to glare Iroh's way.

Iroh chuckled. "If we are to defy Avatar Kyoshi's decree, we may as well be thorough." He smirked. "*Waegu*, indeed."

"They look too good to be pirates," Saoluan said thoughtfully, perched at the *Wave Runner's* rail to peer across brackish water at the sleek, red-and-dark trim of the fast little ship docked among the oak-mangroves. Steel, Fire Nation to the bone if that smokestack was anything to go by... yet anchored among the odd little wood and skin boats plying this estuary like an Unagi curled up and smirking as the fishing fleet sailed by.

That elbow-jab, she felt even through armor. "Like people who want to cut your throat can't be neat?" Langxue hissed.

"Well, sometimes," she admitted, switching her gaze to the swamp flatboat racing toward them with the *weirdest* waterbending she'd ever seen, spray rising behind it like rapids. Shaking her head, she eyed the stout, smirking man supervising the lowering of a rope ladder; Mi, their *dear* captain. She didn't have a real high opinion of Mi at the moment.

"We're sailing straight to Omashu," he said. Unagi's toothpicks, we are.

But Saoluan smiled, and breathed deeply, just as one of the more friendly sailors passed by. Instigating a dropped jaw, a stammer, and a threatening slosh of hot tar out of a bucket before Langxue gave him enough of a shove to counterbalance. "Hey, Shu," Saoluan purred. "Who are all

these guys?"

"Um..."

Langxue glared at the man, a palm-full of water clinking into spiked ice.

Saoluan stifled a giggle as Shu sobered, fast. Sailors were the same everywhere. Some of them had hearing problems. The word "no", for instance. Even if *no* came with the visual illustration of sprained wrists. Not broken wrists, unfortunately; she might have paid their passage, but a captain flexible enough with law and custom to help her sneak out an orphan waterbender wasn't exactly going to cry a river if his disgruntled crew decided to dump them over the side. Sleazeball.

Pincushion sailors with ice, though, and their ears *suddenly* started working. Jarred, maybe, by the reminder that Langxue *was* a waterbender, and dumping them over the side might be the last thing anyone wanted to do.

"Well," Shu started, "this is the edge of the Foggy Swamp - I know it's kind of surprising, there are waterbenders here-"

"The *Fire Nation* guys," Langxue said bluntly.

"Oh! Right. Um." Shu sweated a little. Maybe it was the heat. "Don't worry about 'em."

"About *Fire Nation*?" Saoluan said pointedly.

"Yeah, well... see the flag?"

She saw two; the black flame of the Fire Nation, clear and pristine - and flying precisely below that, a three-quarter-sized flag of a blue mountain on a sunset-shaded field. "Why does a Fire Navy ship have two flags?" Saoluan said bluntly.

"It's not navy," Shu said uncomfortably. "That's a domain flag. Look, that's Byakko. Don't spread it around, but... they're not too bad. Even if they are kind of... *off*." His voice dropped to a confiding whisper. "They eat *bugs*!"

Saoluan's jaw dropped. Though probably not for the reasons Shu was thinking of. Kyoshi Island had picked up some odd habits from their waterbending kin, compounded by living on an *island*. If you wanted meaty, fatty, mouth-watering goodness that wasn't fish or chicken-pig? There *were* options. The elders probably would have told the Avatar they were river shrimp. If they'd served any of such options at all; apparently Air Nomads were vegetarians.

Food. *Real* food, that wasn't dried mutton-beef or salted fish. From that sudden glint in Langxue's eyes, he was just as tempted as she was to jump overboard and go raid a Fire Nation galley.

Not that she was going to admit it. Mainlanders had some pretty harsh things to say about people eating anything that squirmed.

Wimps.

"Your shaman wants what?" Mi blustered.

The stocky Swamper in leaves, leather, and bamboo heaved a put-upon sigh. "How many times have we gotta tell you? Hue's no *shaman*. He just sees what *is*... Whoa., spooky. There they are." Stomping over the deck, he ducked and touched his leaf hat. "Ma'am. Young'un. The Moon, bless her heart, dropped in on Hue. Said you might be headed this way, and could use a hand. If the tides

came out right."

"Dropped in?" Saoluan echoed faintly.

"She shone on the Tree, ma'am." He gave her a wry smile. "Hue's kinda funny that way."

He was wearing about as much clothes as she'd go to a summer beach in. In public. And he thought someone else was weird?

"Well, now... I'd be Tho," he said gravely. "That's Due down there in the boat waitin' for us. And you might be?"

"She's Kyoshi Warrior Saoluan," Langxue said firmly. "I'm Langxue. Why does the Moon want you to do anything? We're on a ship already. We need to get north. Soon."

"Do, huh?" Tho cast a speculative glance at Captain Mi. Who was giving them a smile oily enough that Saoluan wanted soap. Or maybe a torch. "Well. Might could be y'all did not *impress* upon the captain the seriousness of y'all's *situation*."

"My men need a break," Mi said bluntly. "We need to pitch seams. Resupply with fresh water. *Rest* a little." He smirked at her. "Of course, if we had some incentive to get underway a bit faster..."

I hate him a lot, Saoluan decided, subtly gripping Langxue's shoulder before the little yāorén could go for his sword. "Well, if you're all going to be so *busy*," she chirped, "we should just get out of your way for the day! Don't you think so?"

Guanyin be thanked, he didn't try to push it. Yet.

Saoluan boarded the little boat behind Langxue, taking a deep breath to steady herself. And managed not to scream it all out again, as Due wind-milled his arms and their craft took off like a bolt of lightning.

"*Awesome!*"

Saoluan watched Langxue lean into the breeze, grinning like a maniac, and slapped down her own impulse to panic. This wasn't the yāorén, or even the little warrior who took every lesson she taught to heart. This was the kid who should have grown up on his family's boat, happy in the wind and water and salt.

Let him have his fun, Saoluan told herself as Due added his own giggling laugh, showing off with a slalom through the water for a fellow bender. *Spirits know, we could all use some.*

They zipped through the small maze of floating docks and salt-stippled trees, slipping out of sight of the *Wave Runner* in minutes. Vrooming around to raise quite a bit more rainbow-glittering spray, until Tho and Due exchanged nods, and Due shifted to an almost sedate glide through the water.

A glide that brought them to the dock just by the Byakko ship, still out of the *Wave Runner's* view. Why was she not surprised?

But they didn't head on board. Which did surprise her. Instead, Tho helped them up onto the dock, argued with his maybe-cousin as the two Swampers tied up, and sat back down in the boat with Due to wait. Politely. At a distance. With a lot of splashing involved, as the pair of them got out a net to go after little fish swarming under the dock.

If she hadn't been watching toward the Fire Nation ship, she'd never have seen the noble coming.

Old, given that full head of snowy hair, pulled up and back in an antique phoenix-tail. Not tall, even for Fire Nation; she'd put him at least two inches shy of her own height. But an easy stride, katana and wakazashi thrust through his belt with quiet confidence...

I do not want to start a fight with this man.

Oddly, she didn't think she'd have to. Those long white whiskers of a mustache twitched with what seemed like relief, and his eyes-

I've never seen eyes like that. Ever.

Pale gold, that seemed to peer through her to her bones. But glinting with humor as well as fire, warm and deep as summer waters.

Saoluan let out her own breath of relief. Whoever he was, he was *better* than she was, and they both knew it. And he had no intention of fighting.

Spirits. She almost felt like crying. *We're safe. We're finally- What am I thinking, he's Fire Nation...*

With the oddest outfit she'd ever seen. Oh, the robe wasn't too outlandish. Wrapped in a belt to carry those swords, but the clasps at the right shoulder and the slit sides for free movement reminded her of stuff she'd seen on merchants from the edges of the Earth Kingdom. But on top of that he was wearing an odd, long-sleeved outer... not *exactly* a robe, it seemed to be only secured by one tie in front. A flow of deep red silk, with black triangles hemming the sleeves like mountains, or flames-

Not black, Saoluan realized, as sunlight shimmered with indigo glints. *Very, very dark blue.*

Why is a Fire noble wearing Water colors?

And why was Langxue eyeing him like he couldn't decide whether to hug the man or cut him down on the spot? "Could you make it any more obvious?" Langxue challenged.

A white brow went up. "Obvious, am I?" A baritone chuckle, without even a hint of the cracks of age.

"You're not even sweating!"

Saoluan blinked, breathing in the muggy air off the swamp. How could she have missed that? She was sweating, Langxue's hair was so damp it was spiky... and the noble looked like it was just a nice, spring-gentle day.

"I am old enough to do as I wish, young man," the elder said dryly. "And those of Byakko are known for being old-fashioned. Who am I to deny custom?"

Which was a twisty enough statement to make Saoluan narrow her eyes at him. There'd been an odd pause in his voice before *custom*. Like he was leaving something important out.

"Human custom," Langxue said flatly.

Saoluan's eyes widened. *Oh no. Oh, hell. Oh, Oma and Shu, how do I get us out of here-*

"It's okay!" Langxue grabbed her left hand before she could move, still gazing at the noble. "He's

help." He hesitated. "I think."

"Are you certain?" the elder said levelly.

"If you were a dark dragon, La wouldn't have asked Hue to help us meet," Langxue said firmly.

A dark dragon? Saoluan wondered. *The dragons are dead.*

"Don't be too certain," came the growl of a reply. "Your lady can be cruel, if it serves her purposes." He gripped the bridge of his nose, and let out a gusting sigh, with only a hint of steam curling from his lips. "But done is done, and my grandson will need your help. As I know you need his." He bowed, hands in the Flame. "I am Shidan of Byakko. And yes, Warrior, I am help. Much as it may gall me. I have nurtured plans to protect those of my domain longer than you can imagine, and to have them overthrown in one throw of the spirits' dice..." Another sigh, but humor glinted in pale gold again. "We of the flesh plan, and those of the spirit act, and all of us must ride the storm. And pray."

"Would someone like to talk so I can get what's going on?" Saoluan scowled, looking between them both with malice aforethought.

"You'd better sit down," Langxue advised.

"I am not sitting down!" Saoluan fumed. "If this is about not scaring me, forget it! You're too late. This is a Fire noble who says the *Moon* sent him. Doesn't that seem just a *little* wrong?"

"He's a dragon, Saoluan."

Gaping, Saoluan sat on rocking wood.

Shidan folded himself gracefully down to match, sheathed swords pulled free to rest against his shoulder. "No screams, Warrior? Either you don't believe, or you're blessed with a braver heart than I would have hoped."

"I don't... *not* believe," Saoluan managed, still staring. "But... Fire Lord Sozin hunted the dragons. They're *dead*."

"Indeed he did, and so it has been thought," Shidan said gravely. "Those of us who did survive have gone to great lengths to be sure rumor is considered truth." He eyed Langxue again. "Yet another reason I am *not* amused at your Lady." A slow breath, and he shook his head. "But we have common foes, and none of us has time for wounded pride."

"What foes?" Saoluan pounced, glad to be back on firmer ground. So to speak. Enemies were killable.

...Well, most of them were. Koh might be another matter.

Focus. "The only enemies *we've* got are the Fire Nation," Saoluan drove on, not bothering to hide her narrowed eyes. "So unless you're planning to help us take them on-"

"I hope I will not be driven to such lengths," Shidan said soberly. "True, it may come to that. But I fear Makoto will find us first."

Langxue stiffened.

Saoluan tried not to shiver. "Someone you... remember?" *No. No way. That was a thousand years*

ago, no one could-

"Dragons live a long, long time," Langxue whispered. Turned a look on Shidan of mingled anger and despair. "Spirits, why hasn't somebody *killed* her?"

"Many have died trying," Shidan said dryly. "Those of my clan said she was cornered once, before Kyoshi came..." He sighed. "And a century ago, she found yet another way to elude challenges. You knew her as Makoto, long ago. But in the Fire Nation, she was Fire Lady Tejina. Wife of Sozin, and mother of Azulon."

Father of Fire Lord Ozai. Saoluan swallowed dryly. *The Fire Lord isn't human.* "Azulon's dead."

"Yes; assassinated within the walls of his very palace," Shidan said, with a grim satisfaction.

"Makoto has never forgiven my kin for that. Nor will she. Ever. Yet even if she cared nothing for us - and she has *very* good reasons to hone her thoughts on us, young warriors - she, too, remembers the yāorén. Better than you can, young one, no matter how La has meddled. Far better than I, who was not even hatched when the last yāorén walked this earth. She knows you are her enemy. She *knows* you will move against her." He frowned. "I have clouded my grandson's trail. Our blood is wave as well as mountain; it can hide even the Moon's pull, if she is not close. But you, young one..." Gold eyes were level. "By now, Koh knows of you. And he will find a way to act. Makoto has been his ally before. I do not doubt she will be so again."

"And you're not strong enough to stop her," Langxue said quietly.

Saoluan winced. *Oh, that's torn it. We're going to have blood and limbs and all kinds of nasty-*

"True," Shidan acknowledged, obviously less than pleased to admit it. "My lady and I have kept Makoto's accursed nose out of our territory. As my parents did before me, and theirs before them. Byakko is safe. But that is wit, and cunning. If the battle should come to pure strength and fire... She is old, little yāorén. Old, and hateful, and evil. And her beloved is dead these many decades. She is wings and claws and flame. And I..." He inclined his head slightly, a rueful smile. "I am what you see."

"But - you're a dragon," Saoluan blurted out. Because it was impossible, it had to be - but Langxue *believed* it.

"A night, or a lifetime," Langxue murmured. "I don't... I should *know*, I just..."

"Agni's gifts always have their cost," Shidan nodded. "As I said. For so long as my lady lives... I am what you see." Teeth glinted in his smile. "Though that is no small thing. And I will aid you. My lady would prefer I do so and come back in one piece - but for our grandson, she will understand if I must take risks." A quiet laugh. "She'll likely thank you for the need, later. Chosen fate or not, I grow restless if I stay too long chained in customs and civility. And you offer me the chance to threaten a few mortals *and* help my true lord's sister?" A curled lip flashed fang. "How can I refuse?"

"*We* didn't offer you anything," Saoluan said pointedly.

"No," Shidan allowed. "Not yet." He regarded them both. "Warrior. I offer aid. I offer help - I cannot *heal* your wound, young yāorén. But I can buy you time. And in regard to time..." He gestured at his ship. "*Nami no Kizu* is faster than any craft you can hire. And a great name's husband can pass through many barriers. Even those of steel and fire."

"He can get us past Fire Navy blockades," Langxue said in an undertone.

"If he wants to," Saoluan shot back, not bothering to lower her voice. "*If* this isn't some kind of crazy Fire Nation trap - how are you even *here*, if we need you so much? And don't tell me about spirits, or luck. I don't *have* luck anymore." *Except bad.*

"You'll have much in common with my grandson, then," Shidan said dryly. "And you may only partly blame the spirits for this. I may be what you see, but I am still spirit enough to sense the fires of my kin, and of my children. And only a bit more than a month ago... I felt La drown my grandson."

Langxue winced. "She did it the *hard* way."

"Indeed," Shidan nodded. "I knew he was not dead, but..." He sighed. "This is not the first time I have felt Agni consider sharing one of his children. Decades ago I combed the world for spirit-healers, and found... well. For good or ill, that firebender was never chosen. But I feared greatly for my grandson. It took time to arrange my absence from Byakko, and when my lady and I had nearly managed it - I felt him healed." He shrugged ruefully. "Given the chance of Makoto's peril, Kotone and I decided I would go anyway. But a bit more quietly, and slowly. Those who know Byakko, know we trade with the Foggy Swamp. And those who *think* they know us, know we seek information on the war, and will be on the hunt for it in the wake of what happened at the North Pole." He inclined his head. "So I am here."

Normally, Saoluan was good at reading people. But Shidan had admitted he wasn't exactly a *person*, and even if he sounded sincere... "I don't trust you."

"Saoluan!" Langxue hissed.

"Let her speak," Shidan said sternly. "My kind prefer the most ruthless truth to lies." He inclined his head. "And how should I be offended? I have given you no reason you can touch. Only my words. That I will not lie to you - you do not know our kind. You do not *know* it is truth."

Saoluan's jaw dropped, before she caught it again. Fire attacked. Always. And he'd just let her assault slide away... "You don't lie? Then why are you wearing blue?"

"A custom of Byakko." Fingernails prying a splinter loose from the dock, he breathed it into flame. And beckoned.

Flame rippled out in a crackling stream, flowing about his hands as he rose and moved. Liquid amber, it spiraled and lashed, deceptively slow. Never still, ever shifting...

"Wave clan," Langxue blurted out. "Your flag is a mountain - but you're a wave clan."

"We are both," Shidan acknowledged, letting flame flow back to the splinter before he blew it out. "Though the heart of the wave, we must keep hidden from all but a few. For the power to heal is the power to let those of true loyalty defy the Fire Lord. And Sozin would let none who defied him survive."

"Fire that heals?" Saoluan said in disbelief. "Fire can't heal!"

"Yes," Langxue said soberly. "Yes, it can. All the wave clans are healers." Sea-green narrowed. "So come up with a better story, because there's no *way* Sozin could wipe out half his own people..." He trailed off, suddenly pale. Clapped a hand over his mouth, and breathed hard.

Saoluan kind of felt like tossing their poor excuse for a breakfast herself. *All the old stories. The old jokes, about Kyoshi and the waegu...*

"You do not trust me, Warrior of Kyoshi?" Shidan's tones were velvet over steel. "I've no reason to trust *you*. Save that we may have common allies... and we most certainly have a common enemy." He nodded, once. "I offer a temporary alliance. Should we choose to travel together, I will defend you, and I will expect the same. Within limits," he scowled at Langxue. "I know the wound you carry, and I will not have you worsen it. The world needs you *alive*." He glanced down. "And that shames me. It shames us all. You are *young*. Barely fledged. I should stuff you back into the nest and fight..." He sighed. "But the world is not so kind."

Silence fell. Saoluan swallowed, and eyed Langxue. "Temporary alliance?"

"I hate your guts, but we both hate the other guy's guts more," Langxue filled in. "So we bury the hatchet and both kick his butt, first."

Saoluan raised an eyebrow, and looked over them both. "So... you've got a good reason to go north?"

"Indeed." Shidan smirked. "I bring my clan the fortuitous news of a granddaughter. Those in Pohuai Stronghold are not as close kin as some of those here... but they will be relieved to know the domain's line is secure."

Kin. "There are dragons in the swamp?" Saoluan blurted out.

Shidan chuckled. "Not quite."

And if that wasn't an *I've got a secret* smirk, she'd eat her lotus tile. "Pohuai Stronghold, huh?" Saoluan mused. "Wow. That just *happens* to be on the way to Gaipan."

"By some quirk of fate, yes, it is," Shidan smiled wryly.

Steeling herself, she gripped his arm in a warrior's clasp. "So what are we waiting for?"

Chapter End Notes

If you're wondering what's up with firebenders and genealogies, besides just trying not to have too much dragon blood, the interested reader might check out human mitochondrial genetics on Wikipedia. Especially the facts that the mtDNA passed to kids from the same mother can vary remarkably, and have differing effects depending on the nuclear DNA involved. Mixing two species (and their mitochondria), even with the spirits taking a hand, isn't exactly something that's always going to have good results. Given the Fire Nation doesn't have genetic testing to figure out what the problem is, they go by a rough rule of thumb: do not marry descendants of sisters. Even so, this doesn't catch everything.

And yes, theoretically speaking, Mai and Zuko would be fine. They don't know that. Plus, they know Azula's involved. Assuming whatever Azula's involved in will screw you up royally (pun intended) is a survival trait.

"Dragon-child" doesn't have to refer to a direct dragon descendant; it can also refer to anyone who exhibits enough of the traits to show there's a lot of dragon in their background. And it can skip generations. (However, Teruko does come from a long, long line of tavern-burners...)

Akuma komainu-ko - roughly, "devil stone lion (or lion-dog) cub". The stone lions are protective guardians outside temples.

Shidan's outfit - think Piandao's robe, with a belt and a haori on top. Yes, the "mountain stripes" were inspired by the Shinsengumi.

For those who are wondering - don't worry about Sokka and Suki. Those two, in canon, understand each other enough to know they've got cultural differences to work out. I think that's the most grounded, plausible, working relationship in the whole show. (And one of the cutest. Sokka's Look of Awe when Suki goes after the Warden in Boiling Rock... there's a guy secure enough in being a warrior to appreciate her!)

And a reviewer pointed me to the TVTropes page on Embers.

...You guys are *awesome*. (Yes, even those of you who think I like Zuko too much. And that I did everything wrong. That page is cool!)

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

And another Azula warning. Plus, many notes at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In the middle of the night, curled up next to Appa was the best place to be. For sleeping... or if you had to think.

Aang didn't really want to think, but, well - *want to* seemed to get lost a lot, ever since the monks had told him he was the Avatar. Which just wasn't *fair*.

...And nobody else seemed to think that it wasn't *fair* that it wasn't fair. Which didn't make any *sense*.

And he couldn't ask Toph, because she'd make it another lesson. And he couldn't ask Katara, because she'd try to make it all better. And he didn't *want* her to make it better.

...Well, no. He kind of did. But he had this itchy feeling that making it better wasn't making it *fixed*. And he just didn't know what to *do*-

Frustrated beyond measure, Aang thumped a fist on the ground.

"Gah!"

Aang grinned sheepishly as Sokka pinned a sleepy glare on him, sleeping bag half-raised by bent earth. "Um, Sokka? Can I talk to you a minute?"

Blue eyes blinked at him. Eyed Katara, blissfully dead to the world in her own bag. Turned to eye Toph, who seemed to smirk even in her sleep. If she was sleeping. Aang wasn't quite sure. Narrowed his gaze, and slowly scanned the starlit forest around them, as Sokka tilted an ear to listen for any trace of things moving that shouldn't be.

Why'd she have to call it Boots? Aang wondered, a little cross. *I could have come up with a better name.*

Why'd Toph have to call it anything at all, was what he really wondered. Gyatso *had* talked about spirits, a couple times. And one of the things Aang remembered from that was that names were *important*. The Moon and Ocean had names. Koh had a name. Now this thing had a name. That just *couldn't* be good.

But name or not, everything was quiet. For now.

Rolling his eyes toward the stars, Sokka gently scooped Momo up and off to the side against Katara. Gathered up his sleeping bag, and moved around to the other side of Appa, giving the drowsing bison an absent pat. "So what's up?"

A thousand things tumbled through Aang's head; he let the first one fall out of his mouth. "Why are you sure the Fire Lord's going to have the Yu Yan at the invasion?"

"I'm not. I kind of hope he doesn't," Sokka said, blinking himself more awake. "But it'd be dumb if we didn't plan for it. They caught you once."

"So what?" Aang said crossly. "So did those pirates."

"When they had Katara to lure us in. Not the same."

"Zhao almost got us a couple times."

"Not sure you noticed, but Zhao got munched by an angry fish spirit-monster," Sokka pointed out wryly. "He's kind of not available."

"*Bumi* did it-"

"By slipping funky rock rings on us when you couldn't earthbend. That's not going to work now." Sokka frowned. "Arrows still will."

"Oh, come on!" Aang burst out. "Even *Zuko* caught me! And the Fire Lord's not going to have *him* there."

All the way awake now, Sokka gave him a long look. "Even Zuko, huh?"

"Well..." Aang shrugged, feeling oddly itchy again under that stare. "It's not like he's that hard to beat."

Sokka didn't say anything.

"I did it with a *mattress* once!"

"A mattress?" Sokka said warily.

"On the ship. The first day he showed up," Aang grinned. "Boy, did he ever look *mad*."

"I didn't see a mattress when you washed those soldiers off the deck," Sokka pointed out.

"Well, no," Aang admitted, confused. "He was down, though, and I was gliding away to catch up with you guys, and then he jumped after me... What?"

Sokka sighed, and dropped down to thump the mossy ground by Appa's side. "Come on, buddy. We need to talk."

"Well... that's what I said, but..." Aang folded himself down by Sokka, worried. "What's wrong?"

Sokka wrapped blankets around himself, getting comfortable next to Appa's warm fur. Eyed Aang again, with a look of sympathy. "You never really got into a fight with other guys when you were growing up, did you?"

"A fight?" Aang echoed, not sure where this was headed. "We had practice. And sparring. The older students could get a little rough sometimes... well, that's what Gyatso said, anyway. We didn't see them much." He grinned. "Air *Nomads*. Gyatso always said teenagers needed to roam around and get it out of their system, and the younger grown-up monks could use up *their* energy to keep them out of trouble. Elders stayed at the temples. And kids."

"So you never really saw a fight, like us against Zuko," Sokka concluded.

"No!" Aang exclaimed, surprised Sokka could even think that. "Who'd want to do that?"

"Guys fight, sometimes," Sokka said plainly. "Girls too, when they get really mad. Though Gran-Gran usually got that stopped quick... Aang. When you're in a fight? You're not beaten until you go down and *stay* down."

"But... Zuko doesn't..."

"Unless we fly off, or he gets hit by a paralyzing tongue, or Katara buries him under ice after he's already walked through a blizzard - no. He doesn't," Sokka agreed. "Speaking of ice. You know what that finishing move of Pakku's really does, don't you?"

"I know what a *finishing move* is!" Aang shook in place a little; suddenly, deeply angry. He wasn't an idiot. He didn't *care* what Zuko thought. Zuko had hurt the best, most wonderful person he'd ever met. What did it matter what *Zuko* thought? "Why do you think I never froze anybody like that? That's a horrible thing to teach somebody! Even if you're just using it on a waterbender, and they can melt it back if they think about it. What if they get too scared to think? I do!"

Silence. Sokka was *looking* at him, eyes wide and surprised.

"Sometimes, I do," Aang admitted. "I'm learning it from Katara because I *have* to. I'm the Avatar. I have to master waterbending. Even when I never ever want to do that to *anybody*." He shivered. "Airbending doesn't *have* a finishing move. We're not like that. We respect life. We don't eat meat, we don't kill people - we don't *have* evil people!" And - that was the wrong thing to say, he just knew it...

"Must be pretty lonely, sometimes," Sokka said quietly.

"Lonely?" Aang said quickly, feeling his heart do a kind of funny stab, like it was trying to get somewhere else. "Why would I be lonely? I've got Appa, and Momo, and you guys..."

Sokka leaned forward, away from warm fur. "Yeah. But it's not the same. When we were at the North Pole..." He looked toward the sky, where moonlight filtered softly down through new leaves. "They were Water Tribe, but they weren't *our* tribe. They were... different." He let out a resigned breath. "Aang, this kinda doesn't make me sound like the best guy, but I think you ought to know. What really ticked me off about Hahn? Besides him thinking Yue was just a *perk*." Sokka almost growled at the thought; shook his head, and sighed again. "He said I was just a back-ice rube, who didn't know anything about the *political complexities* of their kind of life. And you know what? He was right."

"That's not right!" Aang protested, hands flying as if he could push away the ache in Sokka's eyes. "You're a great guy!"

"But I'm not *that kind* of guy," Sokka said bluntly. "I'm not like Chief Arnook. Fancy words, and moving like all those fancy furs are made out of iron, and just looking all sober and sad over Yue. She was his daughter and he just sits there. My dad would cry. Maybe later. After he knew the rest of us were safe. But I *know* he'd cry."

Aang bit his lip. "Maybe he did, and we just didn't see it," he suggested. "Kuzon was like that a lot. He was really... private. Gyatso told me some people are just like that." He hunted in memory. "Because Kuzon was from the old clans, and they don't talk much." And Gyatso had given him a *look* when he'd said it. The kind he sometimes used playing Pai Sho; *pay attention, there's a move coming you won't see until it's over*.

Only right about then Kuzon had shown up with Shidan, clear gold eyes obviously putting aside whatever it was he'd gone off upset about. Which was weird, he couldn't have had a chance to talk

to anybody... but the sky was great, and they were going flying, so what was the problem?

"Maybe," Sokka admitted. "I'm still not that kind of guy. And I'm not the kind of guy you think I am, either. None of us are." Rummaging in his bag, he pulled out Boomerang. "I'm going to take a wild guess here, and I need you to tell me if I'm right. You think hunting is wrong. The same way you think killing people is wrong."

"Killing people *is* wrong," Aang objected. "But you're not - you don't-" How could he say this and make it come out right? "I know the Water Tribes hunt. You're not monks. You live on the ice, and, well, sea-prunes... though seaweed-bread's pretty good, I don't know why you don't eat more of that-"

"There's never a lot of it," Sokka shrugged. "You could gather all spring and summer, and you still couldn't feed the village. Gran-Gran says you'd get sick if you tried. Winter melts the fat right off you. People who don't hunt can't live at the poles." He fingered Boomerang's edge, just before the knife-sharp blade. "But it's kind of all tangled up together, right? You respect life. So you don't want to kill anything. Or anybody."

"Right!" Aang blew out a breath of relief, ruffling the bushes on the other side of the clearing. Sokka got it. And he wasn't mad. *Whew.* "If you don't respect life - well, you'd never be like Azula. But just look at the Fire Nation! How can they live like that?"

"Azula's a lousy hunter."

Aang couldn't help it. He blinked at Sokka, not sure he'd heard right. "But... she was in Omashu. And then the ghost town, and Ba Sing Se..."

"Sure, she showed up in Omashu," Sokka agreed. "I don't think she expected to see us. Then she tracked Appa's fur. And then she was in the drill, and she knew where we'd be as long as the Fire Army was camped outside the walls." He shook his head. "That's not hunting, Aang. More like... hanging around the storage pits to kill weevil-rats."

"Are we even speaking the same language?" Aang implored the sky. "Hunting, killing - what's the difference?"

"Respect."

Aang glared at him. "How can you respect life if you're gonna kill it?"

"If you don't, you're a lousy hunter." Sokka put Boomerang away. "Maybe I don't always act respectful hunting around here, but I don't know what animals off the ice want for their spirits. So I just hunt, and figure I'll say thanks later. If they let me kill them."

"If they *let* you?" Aang shook his head, hoping some sense would rattle loose. "You're human, Sokka. You're bigger than they are, smarter than they are-"

"You ever see an arctic hippo?" Sokka put in. "The spirits *gave* us brains, Aang. Like they gave animals better eyes, better ears, teeth, claws... arctic hippos can kill you. Easy. If you're not smart. Zebra-seals have fangs that can shred you. A hunter has to have *respect*. He's got to know what he's hunting. Study it. Be *careful*. And be lucky. And if you do all that, you get a chance to bring meat home. So the village lives." He spread empty hands. "I'm not asking you to go hunting, Aang. If the way Air Nomads respect the spirits is to *not* eat them - okay. But if you keep thinking people don't respect life when they *do* - you're not going to get why people are doing what they're doing. And that's like playing with blasting jelly. Sooner or later, it's going to blow up in our faces."

"He's right, Aang," Katara said flatly. "Though I think we all get *Azula* just fine. She doesn't just not respect life. She's... evil."

Aang jumped. Smiled weakly at the girls who'd just rounded Appa. "Um... hi?" *I was kind of hoping you'd stay asleep? Uh-uh, that won't work-*

"Start shoving earth around, I feel it," Toph said bluntly. "I don't know about hunting, but I gotta agree with Katara. Azula doesn't respect anybody."

"She'd risk killing a baby just to get her own way," Katara said darkly. "A *Fire Nation* baby. And Mai just *let* her."

"I'm not sure Mai had a choice," Sokka said thoughtfully. "If you're right, Toph, and they have to do what the Fire Lord wants - Azula's his daughter."

"So?" Aang said crossly. Not that he wanted to believe anyone could have wanted to risk a little kid's life. Even Mai, who looked like somebody had carved her face out of sour ice. But there was one *big* hole in Sokka's idea. "Zuko's his son."

"Zuko's banished," Sokka said bluntly. "That's not usually as nice as what happened to Katara." He crossed his arms, and gave his sister a sober look. "In the Water Tribes? Banished means you can't come back. No one can help you. No one will even talk to you, if they can get out of it." He glanced back at Aang. "I don't know how it works in the Fire Nation. All I know is what we saw. Azula got tanks, and drills, and all the help she had to have to take down Kyoshi Warriors. Zuko had a ship, and Iroh, and that weird bounty hunter. That's it. *Zhao* had more to go after us with than Zuko did."

Aang froze in place, staring at Katara. You couldn't come back? That wasn't a big deal. Before the war, people from other nations had told him that a lot; go away, and stay away. And maybe it wasn't nice, but there were always more places to go. More people to see. More creatures to ride, whether they liked it or not.

But... nobody would talk to you? That was horrible. That was... that was like being *dead*. "You did that?" he whispered. "For me?"

Katara swallowed dryly. "Aang-"

Sokka cut her off. "Don't answer that."

"Sokka!"

"This was a private, *manly* conversation, and I'd kind of appreciate it if you two would head back that way and let the rest of it be private. And manly." Sokka waved toward Appa's other side, blue eyes serious.

"Oh, sure. One day dodging rocks instead of ice, and you're incredibly manly." But Katara's gaze slid away from his, and she touched Toph's shoulder. "Come on. They probably just want to be gross at each other."

"Try closing your eyes," Toph advised as they moved off. "It's a lot harder to be gross if you can't see it." She jabbed a finger Sokka's way. "But if earthworms end up in my noodles? I know just who I'm coming for."

Aang grinned.

"Quit that!" Sokka hissed, as the girls went out of sight. "You know I wouldn't do that to Toph."

"Sure I do," Aang agreed, still grinning. "But does Toph know that?"

"She'll know when I tell her *I didn't do it*."

Yeah. She probably would. Darn.

"Aang." Sokka looked suddenly serious. "Don't ask Katara why she did that. Not unless you're sure you want to know."

"But she left because of me," Aang said, puzzled.

"Maybe."

"Maybe?" Aang echoed, incredulous. "She didn't want me to be alone, Sokka. She went penguin-sledding with me, she wanted to help-"

"She wanted to get to the North Pole and learn waterbending."

Aang stared at him. That... hurt. And it wasn't true. It *couldn't* be.

"I'm not saying that's why she went with you," Sokka said soberly. "We're your friends. And your family. But she's always wanted to be a waterbender. Even before Mom-" He had to stop, and shake his head. "Look. People can have a lot of reasons for doing something. And the one you see isn't always the one they're thinking of. Okay?"

Aang gulped. "You mean, like we think the Fire Nation is just out to take over the world. But they think," he had to pause, lump in his throat. "They think they're trying to protect themselves. From the Avatar." And that just wasn't right. The Avatar was supposed to be the hope for the world. That's what everybody said.

...Well, almost everybody.

"I think maybe some of them started out that way," Sokka said thoughtfully. "I'm pretty sure Iroh knows that's not what they're doing now." He glanced at Aang, fingers worrying the edge of his sleeping bag. "And I think... if Zuko really thought you were the bad guy, none of us would be here."

Aang was already sitting down. Now he kind of wished he could fall down. But Appa was behind him, which made that kind of not an option. "But... Zuko wouldn't... I mean, even at your village, with all that fire, he didn't want to hurt anybody! Not *really*." Aang rolled his eyes. "So I don't get why he's all upset about one lie. *He* got tricky first."

Sokka was silent.

Curious, Aang eyed him. "What's wrong now?"

Sokka dragged out Boomerang again. And this time, banged his head against it. "Aang... *how did you know that?*"

"Master airbender, remember?" Aang reminded him. "We just *know*." He frowned. "Only Jet... I guess he really believed he was doing the right thing, taking out the dam. Or he did while he was talking to us. Gyatso said that could happen. That some people could just tell *part* of the truth, and make themselves believe that was all of it while they talked to you. I mean, I knew Gyatso was

telling the truth about it, but it sounded so weird..."

"You knew Zuko wasn't going to kill us," Sokka said flatly.

"Like Bumi," Aang shrugged. "He wanted you scared, but he wasn't really going to let you get crushed." He frowned. "Chin Village - that was weird. The guys in prison told the truth, but that mayor... he just said whatever he wanted. Shouldn't it kind of be the other way around?"

Sokka was gripping Boomerang like the last branch before a cliff. "You knew all the time Zuko wasn't trying to kill us?" His jaw worked, as he tried not to sputter. "You- you- do you have any idea how hard that must have been?"

"Um..." Aang looked at him dubiously. "Killing people is supposed to be hard. It's *wrong*."

"That's not what I- Argh!" Sokka banged his head against his weapon again. Made himself breathe, grumbling something under his breath that sounded like the crackles of burning blubber jerky.

"Of *course* you don't," Sokka sighed at last. "You don't hunt. You've never had to worry about, if you miss, you don't eat, your family doesn't eat..." He counted silently under his breath. "Aang. Zuko was hunting us."

Aang gulped, flashing back to a tent, and Iroh's solemn advice about dragons. "He was going to *eat* us?"

Sokka blinked at him.

"He said great names were like dragons!"

Sokka smacked himself in the forehead.

"Well, he did," Aang protested.

"Yeah. Iroh also said they just chew on people. Kill, not eat," Sokka said practically. "If the Fire Nation actually ate people, I think we'd have heard about it."

Oh. Yeah. People said all the other evil stuff the Fire Nation did; killing, burning, stealing, everything. If *that* had happened - well. Somebody would've told them. "But you said Zuko was hunting us," Aang pointed out.

"To catch us alive," Sokka said bluntly. "Gran-Gran said sometimes waterbenders would send people on quests like that. Hunt, don't kill; bring it back for the Moon and Ocean to bless. It's *hard*." He looked straight at Aang. "It proves you respect the spirits, and your prey. That you know them."

"So?" Aang said, uneasy. He didn't like where this seemed to be going.

"So, that's why I think the Yu Yan might be in the Fire Nation when we invade," Sokka stated. "If Avatar Kyoshi can make a Fire Lord, you can stop one. And Ozai's not going to just let that happen." Blue met gray, sober. "Zuko learned about airbenders to hunt you. And he stayed on our trail across the world. He had to learn that from somebody."

Aang started to protest - he wasn't sure what, maybe that Zuko couldn't have learned that much if he'd never caught them so they *stayed* caught-

Stopped. Glanced away from Sokka, and tried to think about what his friend had just said.

Somebody taught Zuko to - to hunt me.

Somebody taught Zuko about airbenders.

And Sokka said hunting was about respect. Respect, and... trying to keep people you cared about alive...

"Aang?" Sokka frowned at him, worried.

"The world's really broken, isn't it?" Aang said, a little shaky. If what he thought was right...

"Yeah. It is." Sokka raised curious brows. "You thinking about something specific?"

"When Zuko broke me out of Zhao's fort, the Yu Yan knocked him out," Aang answered; thinking of a fierce blue mask, the shock of a familiar scar. "I hid him in the forest. And waited 'til he woke up; I wasn't sure he would... And I asked him. If we'd met back then, before everything, could we have been friends?"

"I'm gonna guess he said no," Sokka said wryly.

"He threw fire at me."

"Close enough," Sokka shrugged.

"But he didn't try to chase me," Aang went on. "I don't know why, if he could get up at all, but..." He swallowed. "Or maybe I do. Before I knew who he was, I told him you guys were sick, that you needed those frogs, and you say he's just after *me*..."

"Oh, man," Sokka said softly.

"But it kind of doesn't matter why he did it," Aang gulped. "I asked the wrong question."

"You did?"

"I was thinking about Zuko back then," Aang nodded. "I should have thought about Kuzon, now." It was *hard* to think about people from the past. Only a few months ago, for him, they'd all been alive and happy and *real*...

Now they were gone. Just... ghosts.

"He'd be one of the good guys," Sokka said firmly. "Like Jeong Jeong."

"Boy, I hope not," Aang said sadly. "I mean - I wouldn't want him to be a bad guy! But Jeong Jeong *hates* fire. All he sees is how it hurts people. And Kuzon... he wanted fire to make things *better*." Aang swallowed. "And maybe he could. I *saw* him with green fire, Sokka." He turned a pleading gaze on his friend. "Why didn't he trust me?"

"I don't know," Sokka said thoughtfully. "But I'm going to find out."

"You- huh?" Aang exclaimed.

"It's *important*," Sokka insisted. "Iroh knew about Kuzon. Iroh *knew* he was looking for you. And if Kuzon knew about healing fire, when the rest of the Fire Nation thinks it got wiped out by Kyoshi-" He cut himself off, mouth an unhappy line.

"Sokka?" Aang frowned.

"I don't want to get your hopes up."

"Hopes?" Aang echoed, almost a whisper. Because there was something odd in Sokka's face, like just before he came up with a risky, incredible plan-

"Kuzon was your friend," Sokka said honestly. "I didn't really think about that. The Fire Nation's been the enemy so long. And even if he was your friend, how could one kid get from the Fire Nation to anywhere?" His smile went wry. "But he had a *dragon*."

"Well, yeah," Aang nodded. "He'd come and visit me at the temple all the time..." Words died in his throat, and he stared at Sokka with a weird, wild flutter in his heart.

"He was your friend, and he never stopped looking for you," Sokka said plainly. "And I don't think it was for the Fire Lord." He stared into the night, nodding as he fit bits of fact together like a spider-fly spinning web out of thin air. "He had to know it was dangerous. That the Fire Lord might catch him. But if he knew about healing fire, he was *already* hiding stuff from the Fire Lord."

Aang swallowed. "You mean - Kuzon had a plan?"

Sokka shot a startled look at him, as if he'd just put it together himself. "How fast was Shidan?"

"Um... kind of depended on the weather," Aang answered, surprised. Sokka worried about the weirdest things. "And how far we were going. Appa's faster if it's a calm day, but if Shidan caught a warm wind, or if it got stormy... why?"

"If you're fast enough to be where nobody thinks you can be, you can pull off a plan everybody else thinks is impossible," Sokka stated. "Aang. This is something else you need to know about families. Kuzon wasn't just *your* friend. He would've felt - man, how do I say it? Responsible. Gyatso was the closest thing you had to a father. Those kids you grew up with? Like your brothers. If Kuzon couldn't help you, he *would* have helped them."

Aang winced, fighting the urge to cry. "But... you saw Gyatso..."

"Yeah," Sokka said softly. "And a heck of a lot of firebenders. Grownups, Aang. I didn't see any kids' skulls. Not *one*."

Aang held still. For a moment, he couldn't even breathe.

"I don't know what he tried to do," Sokka admitted. "I don't know if it worked. A hundred *years*. Anything could have gone wrong. But I talked to the Mechanist. I had to talk to somebody about what we saw at your temple, and I figured he must have been in on - on seeing your people got burials..." Sokka swallowed. "He found firebenders. And kids' bones. A lot of them."

Air, Aang told himself, as if from far away. *You've got to breathe.*

"Aang." Sokka gave him a sober look. "I knew Gyatso knew they were coming."

"He couldn't have," Aang whispered. "He would have gone if he knew, he'd be alive!"

"Not if there was something more important than just living," Sokka said quietly. "It's what my dad would do, if people were trying to kill us. He'd stay behind. And fight."

He didn't want to hope. Not after what he'd seen in the temple. What he'd had to accept. It *hurt*. "But... if someone else got away, where...?"

"Anybody who made it must have found a hole and pulled it in after them," Sokka said bluntly. "Teo, his dad - they wouldn't have lived making those gliders if the Fire Nation hadn't wanted them protected." He shook his head. "I don't know, Aang. I don't have any evidence. All I've got is what we *didn't* see." He paused. "There's just one thing we know for sure. Kuzon was Zuko's great-grandfather. And Zuko *doesn't* give up."

And if Sokka and Katara were right, and people in a family were *like* each other... "You think - Kuzon didn't give up." Aang gulped. "I don't know what to do. I almost wish you hadn't said anything..."

"I know. Hope is hard," Sokka said seriously. "Just ask Katara." He eyed Aang. "Maybe there's somebody left. Maybe there isn't. The point is, people *tried*. Regular people. Like me, and Katara, and Toph, and Suki. Like Dad, and the whole tribe. And we're still trying." He waved at the night. "Yeah, the world's broken. We'll fix it. Not today. Maybe not in a hundred more years. But we're not beaten until we quit trying. So we lost Ba Sing Se. For now. But we've got us, and my dad, and the fleet, and all the friends we've made on the way. We can still do this."

"So... you believe in the Avatar after all," Aang said, half to himself.

"No way," Sokka snorted.

Aang's jaw dropped.

"I believe in *you*."

"...Huh?" Aang managed.

"I believe in the kid who was smart enough to trick Katara into penguin-sledding," Sokka said seriously. "Who was crazy enough to ride the Unagi. Who had the guts to save Zuko - man, I can't believe you saved Zuko! - instead of letting Zhao grab him." He smiled wryly. "That's what's really going to save the world. Sure, we need plans and weapons and benders strong enough to stop the Fire Lord. We need to fight. And it's not going to be pretty. But after that? We need *you*."

Aang swallowed, trying to follow where Sokka was going. "The Fire Nation - some of them are just fighting for their families..."

"If we can get them to stop, everything else get simpler," Sokka nodded. "You got the Mechanist to change his mind about the war. We got Haru's people to change theirs. Maybe, just maybe, we can change a few more."

Aang shook his head. "Toph says going against the Fire Lord can *kill* them-"

"Yeah. So I kind of doubt they'll fight with us," Sokka agreed. "But Captain Jee just bent the rules to *not* take Dad's fleet on. Maybe we can't get them on our side. But if we can get some of them to *not* fight..." He spread empty hands.

Yeah, Aang thought, turning that over in his mind. *Yeah, just maybe...* "You think I can do that?"

"I think you're the only guy who can," Sokka said soberly. "We lost Ba Sing Se. I know you hate that. We all do. But for now, we have to live with it. After we beat Ozai, then we can come back and kick Azula's..." He trailed off, eyes widening in horrified amazement. "Oh, no way."

"What?" Aang pounced, worried.

"...Um." Sokka blinked, shaking his head as if to rattle something loose. "Just - something I've got

to think about." He shook his head again. "No way. That'd be just... crazy..."

"*What* would?" Aang insisted.

"...I've got to think about it." Standing, he scooped up his bedroll. "Maybe sleep on it. Crazy, it's gotta be..."

"Could you check if Toph's still up?" Aang said impulsively. "I want to ask her something."

"Yeah, sure," Sokka said absently, almost tripping over one of Appa's paws. "Sorry, buddy. Oh, boy..."

Oh boy, what? Aang wanted to demand. But Sokka said he wanted to think about it, *and* that it was crazy. And maybe when Bumi had talked about thinking like a mad genius, he hadn't just been talking about the Avatar.

Or maybe he wasn't talking about the Avatar at all. Maybe he was talking about me. Aang.

Which was kind of confusing. Guru Pathik had said he had to accept he was the Avatar. People looked up to him because he was the Avatar. The Fire Nation was afraid of him because he was the Avatar.

But Sokka said he was *Aang*. That he shouldn't feel guilty for what Roku and Kyoshi did, or hadn't done. Just what *he* did. And Katara said that maybe he hadn't been there when the temples were attacked, but he was here *now*, and doing his best. And Toph-

Make a plan, then move, Twinkletoes, she'd say. *Earth listens and waits, sure. But when we hit that right moment, we move.*

All of that had something in common. He just had to figure out what.

Toes drumming night-cool ground, Toph felt Aang shift, as if he'd decided. Nodded herself, and walked around where she guessed Aang could see her. "So what'd you figure out?"

"Now," Aang stated. "You, and Sokka and Katara - you all want me to think about *now*. Not the past. Not the future."

He didn't sound too happy about it, either. "Not what Gyatso taught you?"

"No!" He hesitated. "Not exactly. Before the elders told me... you have to have freedom to fly. You have to be in the future, where the wind's going to take you. Now - now's not supposed to matter."

Toph wiggled a finger in her ear. "I kind of hear a *but*."

"After they told me I was the Avatar... Gyatso said we couldn't worry about what was. We had to deal with what *is*."

"He sounds like a good guy," Toph nodded.

"But that's not the way airbenders are supposed to be!"

Ouch. That sounded like just a whine. But the way she could feel Aang curling in on himself, and trying to hide it... *He's really hurting.*

And she could tell him he wasn't the only one. That he wasn't alone.

But I promised.

And would it really help to tell him Zuko was hurting the same way? That a firebender was trying to wrap his mind around water... and that Zuko hadn't run out of time because of *Katara* at all?

I don't know.

So start from what she did know. "It's like a rumble-

"*Everything's* like a rumble to you!" The earth shivered. "This is *real*, Toph! Not some fancy earthbending contest."

"Just figured that out, huh?" Toph said tartly. "Okay, let me clue you in on part of my life that's *not* a rumble. You know, the part where my parents have all kinds of guards so nothing could get in to hurt me, but they don't even tell our neighbors I exist? Nobody treated me as someone *real*, Aang! I wasn't in anybody's debt books. Nobody made deals with me. Everybody made deals *around* me. A rumble was the only place I could be *me*. You think earthbenders are supposed to be like that?"

"Toph-

"The world isn't like your temple, Aang! Okay? I'm sorry, but it's not!" Toph gulped a breath, and tried to let her temper sink back down through her feet. *Too much time with Sparky.*

"I'm really sorry," she said, more quietly. "I just-" A thought hit her, out of the blue as one of Katara's snowballs, and Toph groaned. "Oh man. I *am* sorry. Aang, think about something. Gyatso started telling you different stuff after the elders told you you're the Avatar, right?"

"Um, yeah..."

Toph blew away some stray bangs, and nodded. "So - what if he didn't know 'til then, either?"

Silence. Disbelieving at first. Then, slowly, she felt tension drain out of him. "But... I was still me," Aang stated. "I didn't change."

"Yeah, but you're not just an airbender," Toph said practically. "After Gyatso knew you were the Avatar, he knew you'd have to learn the other elements. And we're a lot more grounded. More *now*."

"He promised it didn't make a difference!"

Fed up, Toph kicked a rock at his head.

Stone crumbled against a defensive fist. "What was *that* for?"

Crossing her arms, Toph cocked her head. "You're not the guy who's supposed to have a head like a rock. Come on, Aang! What if I wasn't born blind? What if one day I just woke up and couldn't see? Would you hand me posters to put up? *You* didn't change. What Gyatso knew you could *do* changed."

Quiet. Almost scary quiet, if she hadn't been able to feel his breathing. A little fast, a little bit of an upset hitch in it - but he was still there.

"So." Toph let out a breath. "You're Aang. And you're the Avatar. I wish somebody could help. That there was somebody who could tell you what you're supposed to do. But we can't. You've gotta figure out who you're gonna be." She paused. "Though I kind of think you should look at

what Kyoshi did, and try something else."

More breathing. Slower now. Good, he was thinking...

Something rattle-stomped yards away, and Toph grinned. "Hey-"

"Don't give it a name!"

Toph closed her lips on *Boots*, and cocked an ear Aang's way. "Why not?"

"...I don't know."

Toes drumming the ground out of rhythm with the frustrated little spirit, Toph waited.

"You said I should look at what Gyatso taught me after." Aang rocked a little in place. "He started reading some new scrolls. Spirit-tales. With benders in them. That's kind of what I was trying with Hei Bai, only in the stories spirits listened to benders right from the start... The villagers already called it the Hei Bai spirit, or I wouldn't have called it anything. Maybe Elder Uncle," Aang allowed thoughtfully. "They like that sometimes. But you don't give spirits names. Things can happen."

"What kind of things?" Toph said warily.

"The stories were all different."

That was not the sound of a happy airbender. "So sometimes it's bad?" Toph asked.

"Yeah," Aang said quietly. "I know they're just stories, but-"

"Okay," Toph nodded.

"...Okay?"

Boots rattled the ground, indignant.

"So they're just stories. The Avatar's stories too," Toph pointed out. "Gyatso was your teacher, and he sounds like a really good guy. If you think he was warning you about spirits, I'm listening."

"But I don't know!" Aang protested.

"Sokka didn't know how to take down that drill when we first ran into it, either," Toph shrugged. "Sometimes, you gotta make it up as you go along." She turned toward the thumping and scuffling of an indignant spirit. "Sorry. But 'til we can find somebody who can tell us - well, you want to be friends, right?"

A put-upon scrape of earth.

"We don't know who to ask," Toph pointed out. "Unless you know where to find a shaman or somebody?"

A thoughtful patter, that slowly faded away into the night.

"You think I'm right?" Aang sounded hopeful.

Argh. "All I know is, I don't know," Toph said bluntly. "So I'm going to act like it might be trouble."

Which it could be. She'd been worrying about Zuko dropping a boulder or two on Aang. This could be it.

Might not even matter if it went after all of us. Sparky wants Aang pounded, he knows Katara hates him, and he knows Sokka's gonna be right behind her. And he knows I can take care of myself.

She didn't *think* Zuko would be that sloppy. Zuko hated hitting things he didn't aim at. But he was *really mad* at Aang.

And he might not know much more about spirits than we do. Even if a couple tried to eat him.

Any way you bent it, couldn't hurt to not call it Boots. She hoped. "Get some sleep," Toph advised, heading back around Appa. "We've got rocks to break in the morning."

"Okay..."

Mmm. Blankets, with just a little dust scattered on top so she was sure what to grab and pull back-

"Toph?" Sokka whispered.

Growling under her breath, Toph crawled under the covers. "Going. To. *Bed*."

"Right, keep it quick, I know this is going to sound crazy but I was thinking of some of Gran-Gran's stories. The old ones, where the chief had more than one son, and the kind of messes that could happen-" Sokka cut himself off, and took a deep breath. "Is Zuko crazy enough to break back in to Ba Sing Se?"

Toph blinked. Waggled a finger in each ear, checking her memory against Sokka's voice. Nope, she'd heard right. "Whoa."

"He would." Sokka sounded dazed. "Why?"

Can't tell you, Toph almost said. Except she could. Some of it. "Duh. He's Lee. Amaya's his tribe. And Uncle loves her to pieces." *And maybe just a little more...* "There's people there he cares about. You think he's just going to leave them for Crazy Blue Fire to grab?"

"And if he does mess with her plans, maybe she doesn't look so good as the heir after all," Sokka said thoughtfully. "Almost wish we could help."

"You do?" Toph blurted out.

"I don't like Zuko. I don't trust him," Sokka said grimly. "But Azula's worse." He sighed, setting it aside. "If Aang went back there, he'd want to free the whole city. And I don't think we can. So we're just going to have to live with whatever the jerkbender pulls off." His tone softened a little, reluctantly. "Or doesn't pull off."

"He'll make it," Toph said firmly.

"Turtle-seals," Sokka shot back.

"And he made it then, too," Toph pointed out. "I'm okay, Sokka. I know what we've gotta do. Teach Aang, and beat the Fire Lord. I made a deal with you guys, and I'm gonna stick to it."

"It's just... I know he's your friend," Sokka admitted.

"And I trust him," Toph nodded. "He's going to stay alive, or I'm going to kick his butt." *You hear*

that, Sparky? Stay alive.

Man, I wish I knew what was going on in Ba Sing Se...

Green flickers playing across her hair from the fireplace of what had been Long Feng's elegant meeting room, Azula regarded her assembled Dai Li. Off to one side, Ty Lee tried to hide that she was biting her lip.

Don't think I'm up to this, do you? Azula mused, trying not to smirk. *I know you're looking for a healer. But I'm not that weak. I can handle treachery like this in my sleep.*

Father would expect no less.

"Our target is about to move," Azula announced. Saw Ty Lee flinch at naming Mai a target, and almost chuckled.

"*Suzuran* will be here tomorrow morning," Azula went on. "Our target knows there is a possibility of recruiting aid from that ship. But that would take time. And the more time I have, the more likely it is Mai will not succeed in her ultimate goal. She *cares* about Min Wen; she will take any risk to see him out of my hands."

"She barely knows the boy, Princess," one of the agents protested. "She's visited him, yes, but..."

"Agent Chan." Azula eyed the Dai Li, almost mildly. "Min, unfortunately for him, was in a position to save her life when she chose to defy me. Mai is Fire Nation. She is strongly bound to him." *But not to me. Damn him.* She'd make him die for that, slowly. Later. "Even if she weren't, by now she realizes I know she's a traitor. If she has any concern for that boy at all... when I break him, she knows who will be her executioner."

...Oh, what a sweet thrill of fear from their spirits. Good. *Good.* Long Feng, and now Quan; too many of the Dai Li underestimated her, and what she would do for her people.

Never again.

"Mai won't wait for *Suzuran*," Azula continued. "She'll strike tonight."

"We can increase the guards-" Chan began.

"That won't be enough," Azula cut him off. "At this moment, with the smallest diversion, Min could stroll right out of his cell and disappear."

"Impossible!" another agent sputtered. "Those cells are inescapable. We searched her thoroughly. There's no way she could have passed him so much as a nail file."

"You searched her and found nothing, so you assumed there was nothing to find," Azula said sharply. "I never choose my servants lightly. Mai is as trained, deadly, and clever as anyone in this room. Except me."

"Princess." Chan bowed. "If you know her, what could she have gotten past our guard?"

"I can only imagine," Azula said dryly. "What it is doesn't matter. Mai would never leave an escape to chance. She would never count on being able to fight her way in. Which means she has discovered some way for Min to free *himself*." She nodded. "Later this evening - past sunset, she may wait until the ghost watch - Min *will* be ready to escape."

One sleeve padding the loop of diamond-wire so it wouldn't cut into his fingers as he sawed, Min drew one more subtle stroke across the inside of the bolt holding his cell door shut. *Think that should do it.*

Tucking the wire back into his sleeve, Min touched the door, reaching out with his chi. You couldn't bend metal, everyone knew that... but Tingzhe had shown him something interesting, years ago. Back when he'd still been a child excited by anything his father did, whether it won the war or not.

"Just a piece of rust, hmm?" Tingzhe had smiled at his disappointed look, then laid the old dagger back into its hole in the excavation. "Feel that. Don't bend the earth. Just feel."

And he had. Mouth dropping open as he finally realized what his father was trying to show him; that there was a rainbow-shading of *difference* between earth and the heart of steel, with rust like that odd green flash between sunset and dark...

Nobody could bend metal. But if you listened, if you worked at it, you *could* bend rust. And all metal rusted. Even the polished steel of his cell. It wasn't much, not even as much as the diamonds on his wire. Not nearly enough to use. But he could *feel* it.

And feeling rust, he could judge how thick metal was inside it. And listen to it, so he knew exactly when he'd cut enough metal that the door-bolt held on the outside... and no more.

The hinges had been trickier. They were on the outside of the door, of course; meaning he not only had to steal time when no guards were looking at his cell, but he had to bend the diamond on the wire itself, forcing it to saw as firm as steel when by rights it should have flopped like a limp noodle.

He had to wryly thank the spirits that they'd left him locked in here; food in, chamber-pots out through the hatch in the door. If anyone had actually opened the door... well, he wasn't sure the hinges would hold.

Blowing away metal dust, Min snuck back to his cot, wrapping chains around himself to hide their cut ends. And shivered. For the past few days, he'd been focused. Busy. Now... now, all there was left to was wait.

And hope Mai got there first.

"Of course, he'll need a distraction." Azula surveyed her Dai Li again. "And that's where your confined spirits come in."

"Our *what*?" someone in the crowd sputtered.

Agent Chan raised his hand slightly, and the sputtering subsided. "Princess. I know we somehow missed the sandal-spirits-"

"That was no accident, Agent Chan. That was a trial run." Azula narrowed her eyes, weighing the man. *He might do. Perhaps.* "Agent Quan arranged that to test our defenses. And see how much it would take to overwhelm them."

Horried silence. But Chan lifted his head to meet her gaze, hazel eyes serious. "Princess. You suggest that Agent Quan would use *spirits* against the *ruler of the city*." He shook his head slowly. "That is... difficult to believe."

"He will," Azula stated, confidence ringing in her voice. "I know the eyes of a man with nothing left to lose." Of course, she'd taken it all from Quan herself. Details, details...

"If so, we should arrest him now, your Highness," Chan replied, outwardly calm. "Before any harm is done."

And leave any of you with doubts of following me? I don't think so. "Agent. I would hardly condemn a man simply for the look in his eyes."

Which was a blatant and unrelenting lie. But it was exactly what they wanted to hear, so they would believe.

So much fun!

"He is your current commander, and you need *proof*," Azula said, with utmost sincerity. "I have full confidence in your ability to contain the situation so we can get it." She inclined her head. "We'll start by reducing the outer guards of your spirit-maze."

Dai Li protect the city.

It'd started as a whisper in Quan's brain, the moment he'd first made plans with Mai. In these dark corridors below the palace it'd grown to a howl, all but deafening him to outside threats. He pushed it aside then, and he pushed it aside now. There were advantages to knowing how mind-bending worked. Especially your own.

Dai Li protect Ba Sing Se.

Snarling, Quan slashed an earth-gloved hand down, slicing a spirit-ward with the stone that had formed it. Shuddering, half through, his own arm rebelling at the thought of sabotage, of *treason*-

Dai Li protect the city!

Mind deliberately blank, he finished the cut. Felt the pulse of malevolence, as kamuiy sealed into chambers further inside the maze tested their limits.

Dai Li protect Ba Sing Se-!

"Not this night," Quan gritted out. And kept moving.

There were guards. Rather, there had *been* guards, before the gold-eyed shadow drifting behind him had lashed out with a hiss of steel and venom. They'd never seen it coming.

He stepped past limp bodies, avoiding accusing eyes. Had to smile wryly, despite himself. Guards and lock and wards, yes; the maze of tunnels here had them all. So captured kamuiy would be held, and purified, and consoled, until finally restless spirits were satisfied and drifted back into the other world where they belonged. Save that dark night of the last Earth King's murder, nothing had *ever* broken out from here.

A pity the Dai Li had never considered someone breaking *in*.

Breaking your contract with the city-! part of his soul shrieked.

"Yes," Quan whispered, trying to catch his breath just before another barred gateway. "I am."

I know what this will cost me. I just don't care anymore.

Not if he could shatter the Fire Princess' plans. If he could *hurt* her, the way she'd cut his heart out, murdering Long Feng. Hurt her the only way that mattered to that monster, smearing her perfect victory...

A shadow flickered, and he didn't move fast enough. Stone ground up, trapping his feet, climbing-

Darts whistled past his head, and an agent dropped. Mai leapt past in the next eye-blink, knives pinning the Dai Li's partner to the wall in a scream of steel on stone before she drove a dart into his shoulder.

Breaking himself free, Quan winced.

Reclaiming her knives, Mai cast a dark look his way. "Focus."

"I'm trying..." Quan shook away the weakness, mind still screaming. "I'll last long enough." *I must.*

Mai eyed him narrowly. Almost spoke-

Shook her head, deliberately leaving his word unchallenged. "You said there would be more guards."

"There should be."

Gold met dark, and he sensed more than saw her nod. Wherever the other Dai Li were, they'd find out soon enough.

It was odd, Quan mused as they slid yet another pierced-steel gate aside. Most people would assume a Dai Li prison would be all sculpted rock, impenetrable without earthbending.

Most people have never dealt with kamuiy.

Dai Li were expected to sacrifice themselves for the city, certainly. But not without reason. To perish at spirits' hands simply because they'd drained you of chi so you could not bend - that was a stupid, *stupid* reason to die.

So. Dai Li prisons for people might need earthbending to escape. Their prison for kamuiy needed none at all. Carved from stone, yes, it was - but pierced with tunnels and gates in a way that made it a spirit-maze all by itself.

A maze he was deliberately weakening with every gateway crumbled, every ward slashed, every strategic hole punched in a wall.

Not too weak, please, Guanyin...

But he needed revenge. Spirits, he *needed* it. The whole Earth Kingdom needed vengeance for Azula's violation. Capturing the heart of who they were, meaning to twist it from Earth to Fire-

He'd never hated anyone the way he hated now. It boiled in him; seethed, like the acid mud-springs legend placed in the Si Wong desert. Seared even the circling light of mind-bending, giving him just enough room to keep his promise to Mai, and to the hapless young earthbender who'd trusted him to protect his family. Even if cost him every other promise broken.

...And perhaps that was Guanyin's will, hearing his plea for mercy. How could it be anything but a blessing to perish? Far, far better than surviving, with hate eating away morals and conscience and compassion until he was willing to do *this*.

A merciful death. But not yet. He counted corridors as they sped silently through the maze: second left, third right - there!

Not the heart of the maze, no. Not that still-guarded corridor where he could feel stone shivering, ready to answer to Dai Li wills. But not moving. Not yet.

You trained them well, Long Feng.

More than enough Dai Li guarding the heart of the maze to take him and Mai both. *More* than enough - but they would not come. They'd hold their posts until ghost-fire itself consumed them. Dai Li here guarded no mere spirits of malice. What lurked behind those walls was nothing less than pure evil. Headless hounds, murderous ghost lion-dillos, razor-fingered specters with smiles of black-thorn fangs. And more, countless more. Even some of those dark spirits that had been loosed decades past, when all the royal family but Kuei perished...

Hold your ground, men. I'm not mad enough to loose those on our people.

...Not quite.

Cup hands, and *slam-*

Stone tore loose, carrying warding steel with it. Door after door in his chosen corridor wrenched free, screaming malice to the night.

For a moment Quan could only breathe, hearing the faint whisper of cloth as Mai followed their plan, turned, and fled. Could only feel, like slime and frost on his soul, as kamuiy after kamuiy slithered, stomped, and rattled free.

I've broken my contract. Breath sighed out of Quan, as a grinning *gǔgé nǚ* turned her eyeless skull his way, fleshless hands already reaching out. *Here's as good a place as any-*

Warm hands seized his shoulder, and *pulled.* "Come on!"

He broke into a stumbling run, carried by steel and fire.

Stupid. Can't die yet. Still have to open a tunnel - there-

Stone crumbled, collapsing into darkness.

Shock and horror, on a host of faces. *Move quickly,* Azula told herself, flaring her inner fire to swamp that sudden blaze of defiance. "They'll have been working with saboteurs, so they'll already have a way to lead the spirits to the prison cells. And to other places as well; saboteurs won't help them simply because it's *the right thing to do.*" Her voice dripped irony.

A heartbeat for that to sink in, and she nodded at Ty Lee, who spread a map of the city for all to see, marked with various potential trouble spots.

Azula gestured over several in the Middle Ring. "The Army barracks." Where loyal Earth kingdom soldiers were now confined, until such time as orders arrived to deal with them properly. "The saboteurs will want payment in their freedom. Or an attempt at it." She touched other spots in the Upper and Lower Ring. "You'll need to coordinate with the local Guards and Fire Nation forces here as well. They'll use spirits, and their *focus* will be the barracks, but they'd be fools not to use purely human sabotage and destruction as well. In as many places as they can wreak it, trying to spread us thin. I imagine there will be several small, localized earthquakes, that just *happen* to hit

innocent civilians. So they can claim we have no intention of rescuing them."

The Outer Ring is on fire!

A heartbeat of pure panic. That was all Master Sergeant Yakume allowed himself; the flames weren't right on top of their Guard station, so he could afford an instant of terror. One moment to allow his soul to breathe; to simply be a man, angry and afraid-

The next, he chained emotion with decades of discipline, barking orders that sent runners to city firemen and the nearest contingent of occupying troops. Captain Lu-shan was already snarling at his Guards, leading them out to push onlookers back and knock on doors of tenements in the path of the flames.

Once, only once as they fought the fires all that heartbreaking night, would An Lu-shan give him a look, blunt and uncompromising as granite. *Did your people do this?*

But by then they'd found buildings collapsed from more than fire, and Yakume stared boldly back as they battled smoke and flames and time to drag civilians from the rubble. *Did yours?*

"How much damage, will tell us a great deal about who was in charge of the sabotage," Azula mused. "I rely on you to make concise and accurate reports, so we can find all of those responsible and restore peace to Ba Sing Se." Half-truths; the best lies of all. She never relied on anyone, but she did want peace in the city. How could it be a productive part of the empire if it wasn't peaceful? Loot was well and good in its place, but it didn't last. Inhabitants would learn to hide what they could, and defiant fools would even deny themselves wealth, rather than let any of it profit their enemies.

Fools. Sell luxuries and buy training. And fight!

So few would. Better, far better, to have them pull in peaceful harness, tithing to the empire. Not as satisfying as looting and death, no. But in the long run, it was far more productive.

And there was always *someone* stupid enough to burn alive.

And once we track down this little plot, Ba Sing Se will be even more firmly in our grasp, Azula thought. Not only because she would have wiped out the troublemakers themselves. Because the citizens would see that their so-called leaders had done them harm, and turn against them.

Earth Kingdom fools. The Fire Nation would understand Low War. And hate us even more fiercely. Azula smiled to herself. *I wonder which idiot of a general I didn't catch, who came up with this plan?*

"People are going to be hurt, aren't they?" Seeking refuge away from the rest of the refugees in these small rooms some noble had sculpted in the cavern's heart ages ago, Earth King Kuei scratched behind a sleepy Bosco's ears. The eyes behind polished glass were still young, but determined. And sad. "Even if this plan Agent Shirong has helped us shape works... people are going to die."

"They are, your majesty," Agent Bon said plainly. "I'm sorry."

"I should have made a better plan," Kuei said, almost soundlessly. "I should have let one of the lesser generals make this plan-"

Bon cleared his throat. "With all due respect, your majesty - no. You shouldn't have."

Kuei shot him a narrow glance. "I'm not a soldier, Agent Bon. I'm certainly no Dai Li!"

"No, your majesty," Bon inclined his head. "That's why your plan has the best chance of working."

Kuei scowled, raising a hand to object-

Stopped. And thought, slowly pacing across the carpet one of his grateful fellow refugees had donated to give bent stone chambers a sense of warmth and welcome. As almost everything within these walls had been given; rugs, furniture, even an odd little water-heating contraption tucked away in the next room, to allow a sort of standing scrub-shower. All gifts of Earth Kingdom refugees - and of the Fire Nation.

"A lord must have his dignity," Pei-born-Maeda had said when Bon asked. Surprised, plainly, that the agent would even *have* to ask. "His majesty's not ours. But we're under his shelter. How can we not look after him?"

Here and now, Bon had to shake his head at the smith's honesty. All his years of service, he'd been taught that the Earth King needed walls, and guards, and Dai Li to preserve his life. Yet here, among people whose families were at least half the blood of the enemy...

Here, my king is safe.

Part of that feeling was based on rational facts. They were hidden, they had supplies, and they had enough earthbenders escaped from normal life or the Army roundup to warn them if others were about to break in. But another part, one Bon winced to admit, was that *he* felt safe.

These people are spirit-touched. All of them.

Not as much as a Dai Li; well, not most of them. But there was that faint sense of *other* about Amaya's people. And all the little things they did, salt-tossing and sake offerings and subtle patterns worked into clothes and wood and stone...

My king is safe. As safe as they can make him.

None of those small protections would stop a truly determined spirit. But little creatures, and the more general fog of malice that usually breathed in the air when humans intrigued for power - those would not touch Kuei. Not here.

I don't know why I'm so surprised, Bon thought ruefully. Amaya chose to help these people. And she'd never had anything but goodwill toward our city.

More pragmatically, Amaya might not be a perfect judge of character, but these folk were almost all from the Lower Ring. If they'd wanted to be trouble, they'd had plenty of chances. Those here now *wanted* to live quiet, peaceful lives in Ba Sing Se.

And if they were wary of men like him - well, who wouldn't be, given what Dai Li did? But they were *only* wary. Not afraid. The Dai Li families he and Shirong and a few other survivors had smuggled down here on Quan's orders, fully expecting to have to guard them near as fiercely as the king-

Those families were safe. *Welcomed*. In a way people as blunt as Maeda could no more feign than they could fly.

Bon rubbed his aching head. Fire Nation refugees who wanted to help. Scrolls of healing - *earth* healing! - discovered in their very own cache. And evidence that some unknown spirit had tampered with the Dai Li's own memories so they'd missed that most precious treasure for Guanyin only knew how many centuries. Though given they'd found that tampering after Kuei had made his judgment... well, Bon had his own suspicions which spirit was responsible.

The world isn't anything like I thought it was. Like Long Feng told us it was, Bon thought, still a bit stunned. *And if it isn't-*

He'd been in the ranks long enough to have heard the rumors; that some were Dai Li because there *was* Fire Nation blood somewhere in their veins, and mind-bending would never take. He hadn't wanted to believe it, of course not...

But he couldn't deny that feeling of safety here. Of being... spirits, how odd... *normal*.

It wasn't that fierce blaze, that *pull*, he'd sensed near the Fire Princess. Azula - spirits, Azula was like a landslide he'd just barely struggled free of, to watch helpless as she carried most of the Dai Li away. Here among the refugees... it was like walking on one of the fields outside the Outer Ring, burned after harvest. Ash on your feet, smoke lingering on your tongue, yet you could *feel* the strength returning to the soil.

We have some of those farmers here. Bon shook his head. *How much have they changed us? We thought we held all the traditions of the Earth Kingdom, and yet... Water Tribe. Fire Nation. Only threads, woven into the vast loom of our city. But everything looks different now.*

Bon didn't know what it meant that Shirong had been adopted by the Wen... clan, he'd definitely heard that word, and tried not to think about it too hard. He wasn't sure he *wanted* to know. But you couldn't miss the change in the man. He seemed - more solid. Stable. Spirits, sometimes the man even *smiled*.

And Shirong was out there now, risking that newfound sense of home and safety to rescue one boy. And carry out the Earth King's plan.

Kuei had finally stopped pacing, eyeing Bon speculatively, as Bosco whuffed and rubbed against a handy chair to scratch his back. "They say the greatest swordsman fears not the second greatest, but the worst."

"Exactly, your majesty," Bon said steadily.

"We have an occupying force within our own walls," Kuei stated, working it out. "Our officers have never trained for that. We call ourselves the Impenetrable City, and they think that way even when it's obvious we're *not*. The Dragon of the West broke the Wall. And now his niece has brought it down."

Bon nodded.

"But the Fire Nation, like Lady Mai, is used to fighting inside their own palaces," Kuei went on. "So any plan we've made, you and I and Agent Shirong and Professor Wen, and everyone else who's helped... any plan like that, that she's willing to risk her life in..."

"Stands a better chance than a plan made by those who depend on walls and armies and standing your ground at all costs," Bon nodded. "I believe so, your majesty." He gave his king a sober look. *Is he ready for this? Oma and Shu, please let him be.* "Sir, we are occupied by the enemy. The Fire Nation can now add our resources to their own, reaching out to conquer those who still resist. That

resistance can either see Ba Sing Se try to act, no matter how rashly - or roll over and submit, helpless as a broken-legged rabbiroo."

Kuei swallowed, briefly closing his eyes. "And I am the Earth King. I am responsible for more than just our city."

"I'm not a general, sir," Bon said steadily. "I never will be. But I know spirits. And spiritually, you *are* the heart of the kingdom. If you move against our enemies, the earth itself will feel it. And it will act." He bent his head, aching for the young man in a king's robes. "Sir, if I may be blunt? Even doing the *wrong* thing, may be the right decision. So long as your people know you will not give up... they will have hope."

"But people are going to die." Kuei winced. "My people."

"We're at war, your majesty. Some of us are going to die, no matter what happens." Bon sighed. "A commander cares about his people. Long Feng cared about us, sir. And he *never* threw our lives away. But he knew he might have to ask us to die. It's our *job*."

"Those people up there aren't Dai Li," Kuei said quietly. "They never wanted to fight."

"But they are Earth Kingdom, your majesty," Bon said steadily. "We *believe* in the Earth Kingdom. In our ways. Our traditions. Our *king*. Even - spirits, I never thought I'd say this - even Amaya's hidden *Fire Nation* folk believe in you. They have to, or they wouldn't be here." He met those terrified, brave eyes. "They're not warriors. They don't want to die. But you are our king. You have to decide. Do we give up who we are... or do we fight?"

"I think I could get to hate being king," Kuei said, half to himself. Breathed out, and nodded. "We'll keep going. Guanyin have mercy on us all."

Bon nodded, trying not to let a rueful smile cross his face. They'd all thought of Kuei as a helpless, naive bookworm, who had to be protected for his own good.

Just as Long Feng intended.

But the Earth King had spent his life growing up with books. And the palace library was stuffed with the oddest texts, from growing silkworms to glass-blowing to tomes on extinct creatures of the poles that had once lunged onto northern Earth Kingdom shores like furry cat-gators. Every book printed in the kingdom since at least the tenth Earth King had a better than even chance of being tucked *somewhere* in that rambling pile of knowledge.

Meaning there were plenty of books on Chin the Conqueror. And hordes of other military men, friends and foes alike. Including, spirits only knew where they'd come from, texts on the Dragon of the West himself.

"They didn't have a date," Kuei had said when Bon started sputtering about that piece of information. "I thought he was just another warlord in Chin's time. That's where they were shelved."

Shelved by *who*, Bon dearly wanted to know. Certainly Long Feng wouldn't have put them there!

Then again, given the odd contacts Amaya still had in the city above, contacts vital to the most fragile part of Lady Mai's plan... well, it seemed there might be more conspiracies in the city than just the Dai Li.

At least this one's on our side. For now. "You should get some rest, your majesty," Bon said

gently. "Worrying yourself sick won't help them."

"I didn't worry about anything except tradition and the next ceremony for years," Kuei muttered. "Look where that got us all."

Bon almost objected. Frowned, thinking better of it.

"That's an interesting silence." Tired, Kuei pushed up his glasses. "If I'm wrong, I wish someone would tell me."

"You're not wrong," Bon admitted. "But you're not entirely right either, your majesty. You are the Earth King. The traditions and ceremonies are important. Spirits need respect and veneration... and once in a while, a stern rebuke if they go too far. Ba Sing Se needs a ruler to handle the matters of this world, that's true. But without one of royal blood to perform the rituals for our city, we will die as surely as by the Fire Nation's flames." He winced. "If you want honesty, your majesty - I've seen spirit-dealt deaths. I'll take the flames."

Kuei gave him the oddest look. Took off his glasses, polished them on his sleeve, and propped them back in place. "Agent Bon. Are you telling me I need to get *married*?"

Bon froze. He hasn't said anything of the sort, but...

That's the pity of being an earthbender. If the ground opens up and swallows you, nobody thinks it was an accident.

Gathering his courage, Bon cleared his throat. "It would be wise, sir." More; it could be vital. While Kuei had been safe in the palace, while the city had been safe, they could wait. Now...

If Kuei dies, there's no one left of the Earth King's blood to hold the barriers. A chill shivered down Bon's spine. He'd been far too young on that moon-dark night to remember anything but screaming, but he'd heard the stories. And Shirong's infamous aura of doom was all the proof anyone needed.

"I suppose that's why the noble ladies keep bringing their daughters to those parties," Kuei mused. "I never knew if I should feel sorry for them or run screaming. Not that they were ever allowed to be close enough to run from, but... they never seemed as if they really wanted to be there. That's not how it should be. At least," Kuei looked a bit shy, "I don't think it is. It didn't seem like men and women were that way in *Princesses of the Golden Cage*. Or *Blind as a Badger-Mole*. Or *Love Amongst the*-" Kuei cut himself off, reddening at Bon's look.

"Your majesty," Bon said, with what he *hoped* sounded like curious calm. "Have you been studying marriage... from romance novels?"

"Well, I didn't... I never... how does anyone *ask* about that?" Kuei's flush deepened.

"There are some married Dai Li, sir," Bon said seriously. Trying not to laugh, or cry. "I'll... find one of them." Even if he had to drag them off of watch and take theirs over himself. *So much for sleep tonight.*

Sleep could wait. His king, and his city, needed this. Romance, marriage, an heir - none of these were trivial. Not for the Earth King.

And not for Kuei, Bon reflected, smiling a little to himself. With a little reality abrading all the layers of books and ceremony, there seemed to be an honest-to-spirits young man shining through.

Oma and Shu, what a way to find him.

He only hoped that young man could survive the consequences of this night.

"But it doesn't matter who planned this little farce of a rescue, because it will be nothing but a miserable failure," Azula said coldly. One gesture with a sharp-edged nail, and Ty Lee unrolled another map; a floor-plan of the palace, the grounds, and the underground prisons. "The most efficient and least detectable tunnel from the spirit-maze will exit here. One floor above the prison cells." Azula smirked. "And that, is where we'll stop them."

It wasn't even a fight.

Waiting for them in his own section of tunnel, Shirong opened stone into the palace and latched onto Quan, freeing Mai to dive and throw and scatter paralyzed and knife-pinned Dai Li before her.

Then the spirits poured free.

Bones sank claw-like into cloth and skin. Hundred-eyed *bǎiyǎnlián* cast glares of madness, chittering like evil children. Wispy as winding sheets, *miáncháng* rustled through the air, striking at necks to strangle.

We're winning, Mai thought dizzily, as more agents fell. *We're going to make it-*

Blue fire blazed, searing away spirit-cloth.

"I don't even have to hunt you down." Azula stepped out of the shadows. "How thoughtful."

No...

Steel and chains and shivering. Not from cold. He wasn't cold.

I want to see the sun.

Huddled on his cot in the corner, chains draped around him in case of visitors, Min pressed his forehead against the back of his wrists. And wished he could deny he'd ever thought it.

He was an *earthbender*. Born and bred in Ba Sing Se. So long as the air was fresh and the water clear, he shouldn't care if it was night or day, winter or summer. So long as there was earth-

But there wasn't. Just a ghost of rust on steel and stray bits of other metal, wrapped around his chi as far as he could reach. Just an awful, aching grief, flooding him like ice water; cold and ancient and somehow *not his-*

I want to see the sun.

What did you *do*, when your own blood was the enemy?

No! Don't think that way. She wants you to think that way. If you hate Mom, you hate your clan, and then-

Min shuddered, thinking of Azula's smile.

She hadn't touched him. Hadn't even come in the cell with him. But every day, at least once a day,

she'd come to look at him. Watching through the barred window with that subtle, knowing smirk.

And every second she stood there, he could *feel* her prying at his soul.

Come. Come to me. I am strong; I will lead you, even through rage and fire. Come...

No, and no, and *no*. He'd chanted it under his breath like a meditative mantra, trying to will away that awful *feel* of her. Leaning on that strength from elsewhere; it might be enemy blood, it might be Fire Nation, but spirits, *anything* was better than letting her take him...

Oma and Shu, forgive me.

Oh, Guanyin have mercy. He could all but taste what sunlight would feel like. Honey-gold, and warm, so warm, sinking into chilled bones, filling all the aching emptiness...

She's killing me.

Min blinked, and breathed, trying to think past fear's chill to his father's old lessons. Benders... benders needed their element to fuel their chi. An earthbender on a lake was as weak and vulnerable as a waterbender in the desert, or a firebender buried underground-

I'm not a firebender!

But Jinhai was. And if what Suyin had said about her lessons was right, and *everyone* used chi, and he was leaning on something of Fire to keep that monster out of his head...

No earth. No sun. She's killing me.

And she knows it.

Min closed his eyes, tears leaking. Stupid. He felt so stupid, he didn't want to be afraid...

Courage is not the absence of fear, Min, Tingzhe's voice murmured in memory. True courage is to be afraid, and accept it, and do what must be done.

...Maybe his father had known what he was talking about after all.

Just like a university exam, where you can't recall the answers, hmm? You've had your moment to panic. There's nothing wrong with panic. All beings do. What makes us human is thinking past it.

Breathe, son. Slow and deep. Be the mountain rising up. Breathe. And think.

In, and out. Clutch the diamond-dusted wire hidden in his hand, and let himself feel that scattering of earth-

"It won't work."

Min stiffened, chains on his arms rustling. Eyed the barred window, where one of the Dai Li guards was calmly peering through. Ling, he thought this one was called; and what it said of a man that he let people call him *Specter*...

He couldn't have seen the wire. Or the filings; he'd been very, very careful to blow them discreetly out of sight in the shadows. And they'd all behaved. Almost like crumbs of soil... but that was silly, everyone knew *metal* didn't bend. "What won't work?"

"Your plan."

"I'm chained in here, while the Fire Princess takes over our city and tries to find my family. So she can *murder* them," Min snarled. "Do you have a plan? Because I'd love to hear one!"

"Nice try." The guard looked darkly amused. "Pity about that family, boy. Things would be so much easier for you if we could just make you forget."

Min shivered.

"But if you *are* a loyal citizen of Ba Sing Se," Ling's voice dripped sarcasm, "then you'll just have to suffer. Because if you're true, Earth Kingdom born - you know there are things the Fire Nation should never learn of." He paused, deliberately. "So cheer up. You won't live to serve the Fire Princess."

She doesn't know what you can do with mind-bending, Min realized. *And you plan to keep it that way.*

Part of him found that oddly comforting.

No. No, I am not going to die here. I am not going to give up.

Never give up without a fight.

"Oma and Shu, it must be true," Ling murmured, watching him narrowly. "You shouldn't have this much fight left."

And that stung, even through the fear. Deeper than Min had thought possible. "My father *never* stopped fighting you!"

"An archaeologist?" Ling said contemptuously. "And a professor's wife. You think your parents are going to chase the nightmares away and save you?" His lip curled. "Child. This is the real world. There *are* no miracles."

Wind moaned down the corridor, and every glowing crystal blew out.

One, two, three little traitors, Azula mused, stalking in front of the bruised and bloodied failures chained before her. At least one of them had tested the chains, she'd heard the clink - but her Dai Li had sunk them into the audience room floor, and it'd take a more skilled bender than these rejects to free himself with no slack to move his arms. Even if one tried, Ty Lee was barely a breath away, poised to strike them down.

Fitting, to bring them up here. The Earth King's very throne room, where justice would be done. *Her* justice.

The Fire Nation's justice.

Same thing, really. She served the Fire Lord, and they all served Fire Lord Sozin's great vision. A Fire Nation as powerful as any Avatar; so powerful, it would never bend to the so-called will of the world again.

And we are making that real. Here. Now.

Gracefully seating herself on the throne, Azula smirked at the three on their knees. One ex-servant, who'd survived treachery. One soon to be former Dai Li second in command, who didn't look at *all* well; she'd have to do something about that, he couldn't be allowed to die until she said so. And

another Dai Li, last seen fleeing with her now-deceased brother...

Azula's eyes narrowed, and she shot out of the throne to stalk up to Shirong. Stared at him. *Felt* at him.

He feels like fire.

Impossible. He was Dai Li. An earthbender; everyone attested to it. True, some of the agents might have Fire Nation ancestry, but-

He doesn't feel like that little fool downstairs. He feels like fire. "What are you?" Azula snarled.

Lip torn, one eye already bruised and blackening, Shirong didn't even try to distract her. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Truth. She could see it, in that fey, steady gaze. A look that reminded her of-

The *crack* of her slap shattered the silence. She stalked away, hands shaking with rage. How dare he look like Zuko; about to die, and knowing it, and beyond any mortal doubt that he was doing the right thing. How *dare* he?

"Where's Min?" Anger glittered in eyes that should be cold, flat gold.

Azula's fingers curled at the sight, eager to flay that still face open to the bone. That Mai would allow herself to be anything but the useful, courtly mask... "You let him ruin you!"

Mai's head snapped up. "I have done *nothing* that would shame my clan."

"You really think so?" Azula said silkily. "After you've defied your princess?"

"I sent a letter to my parents to announce loyalty reclaimed."

Truth; Azula could hear it. Impossible as it should have been for any letter to have left Ba Sing Se. *So you've saved them, and damned yourself. How very noble.* Azula's lip curled. *How very stupid. I let you be with Zuko too long...*

"You have what you want." Mai's voice was level again. "Let Min go."

The princess smirked. "You know me better than that, Mai. Once I have an enemy in my grasp, I never, *ever* let them go."

Mai's face didn't change.

"You do know me better than that," Azula mused, suddenly thoughtful. *Why doesn't she flinch? She's lost. Everything. I've predicted her every scheme, countered every move...*

One of the servants' doors swung open.

"Leave us!" Her firebolt seared the end off of the noble girl's ornate tortoiseshell comb, tainting the air with smoke. "I am not to be disturbed!"

The girl was made of stern stuff, for a useless Earth Kingdom trinket. She dropped to her knees, pale but still conscious, holding out a folded fan with trembling hands.

"Ooo!" Ty Lee bounced out of the shadows, face split ear to ear with an eager grin. "It's for you!"

"What?" Azula said blankly.

"I heard about this in the circus," Ty Lee smiled. "You must have really impressed some cute guy."

Azula shot the acrobat an incredulous sideways glance, unwilling to take her gaze off a potential threat. "At this hour?"

"Oh, of course," Ty Lee nodded, perfectly sincere. "You don't send pillow-poems in daylight. That'd be rude. Especially if you already had a boyfriend. Or ten."

"A boy-" Fire blazed in Azula's hands, and she turned a furious gaze on the quaking girl.

"It's not her fault!" Ty Lee was right beside her, worried and upset. "She's just a messenger."

...Right. And the first rule of messengers was, don't incinerate them. Good messengers were hard to come by. "Who sent this?" Azula hissed.

"He- he-" Shaking on her knees, the girl swallowed. "He wore a mask..."

"He probably signed the poem," Ty Lee put in. "That's what some of the girls in the circus showed me."

Good. Then his own arrogance would be his downfall. Throttling back her rage, Azula held out her hand. "You'd better be ready to find another master, girl."

Trying not to whimper, the girl presented the fan in both hands, laying it in her grasp as gentle as dandelion fluff.

For a second, Azula considered stepping back. Even a terrified girl might be a threat.

I will show no fear. The Dai Li, the Earth Army - they have no women among them.

A useless waste of resources. Granted, the tactics Earth Kingdom generals used meant it wouldn't be wise to place most women in front-line battles. But you didn't need to be a man to drop rocks off a wall!

Lip curled in a sneer, Azula opened the saffron-edged, mint-patterned fan.

Overlapping robes

Should bring warm new beginnings.

But you are still cold.

No signature. Azula frowned at the fan, puzzling at the meaning, the foreign but acid insult she could all but taste-

Demure hands slashed up, and stone *moved*.

And her fiery shriek caught nothing, *nothing* in its blast, for Ty Lee had *pulled the girl away*...

Trapped in bent stone, Azula glared at the chi-blocker. "Traitor!"

"No!" Ty Lee actually sounded hurt. She dropped to her knees - prudently out of fire-breath range. "You're my friend. I'd never betray you, ever!" She raised her head, tears in gray eyes. "But you're hurt, you don't know how hurt, and you need a healer. More than anybody can do with herbs. I had to find you one!"

"Idiot!" Azula hissed. "You think a healer in this city is going to do anything but kill me?"

"I certainly want to." Stepping through the door in green upper-class robes that matched the messenger's, the matronly woman's blue eyes were still unmistakable.

Healer Amaya, Azula realized. So the weevil-rat's finally crawled from her den.

"I know some of what you've done." Amaya stopped by Ty Lee, weighing Azula in her gaze. "And I can only imagine what you will do."

The Dai Li aren't stopping her. Azula twisted, skin rasping against stone, more furious than she'd ever been. *They're loyal to me! Why aren't they stopping her?*

"But if you die here, Fire Lord Ozai will make this city a pyre in your memory," Amaya said softly, circling out of Azula's view as she stalked nearer. "And if I can stop that, I will." Her voice dropped. "And when it comes to your life... my student, your brother, would move mountains to see you healed."

No! You can't do that to me. You can't throw me on Zuko's mercy-

Cool water touched her head, and the world went out.

Like walking barefoot over knives.

Reaching carefully through water and blood, Amaya coaxed fluids from swelling tissues, gently mending delicate capillaries. Spirits, it was amazing the girl was even standing, much less outwitting them as easily as Mai had predicted.

You're Zuko's sister after all. Too stubborn to lie down and die.

Brain injuries were oddly easy and hard at once. There was nothing large to coax back into wellness; not like a broken bone, or torn muscle. Everything that needed mending was small. Delicate. Intricately intertwined with everything else in the brain, so a slight imbalance *here* would cascade *there*, and roar on to potentially ravage mind and spirit...

But you are fire, and the will to live. You will survive this.

Shift fluid. Heal. Wait, reading how the storm of the mind flexed. Heal again...

There.

The physical damage was mended. Now for the tricky part.

Eyes closed, Amaya reached beyond body and mind, toward a keening flame of spirit. *Zuko loves you.*

Flames spat and crackled; negation, denial. Hands pressing a pillow home to smother. An evil smirk, shared with her father, whenever she crushed her brother. A sad mother's face, whispering *monster...*

It scourged Amaya like acid. But she'd touched evil before. She would *not* let it win. *He knows*, she murmured to that dark spirit. *He knows all of this. But he knows something more. You are his sister... and you are all the hope your father has left.*

LIAR!

Girded with water and spirit, Amaya forged into the inferno.

"She won't hurt a patient," Shirong said swiftly, as Azula gasped and Chan tensed. "You know Amaya. You *know* she won't." He nodded toward Ty Lee; about as much as he could move, in such tight chains. "A life for a life. Min's freedom, for the princess' healing. That was the bargain."

Agent Chan relaxed slightly. Though he gave the still-shivering Jia a dark look. "Does your father know you behave in such... such..."

"I not only know," Tingzhe said gravely, stepping through the door with Meixiang close behind, "I thoroughly approve." He bent to offer his daughter a hand, drawing her up to unsteady feet. "Well done."

"I was so scared." Jia clung to him, tears trickling through perfect makeup. "Daddy..."

"Shh. It's over now." Tingzhe stroked her hair, rocking her gently. "It's over."

Agent Chan raised an eyebrow.

Shirong chuckled wryly, taking in Meixiang's casual stance... that would have a blade through the first of the Dai Li to move. "I know. A bargain to save Min's life doesn't save ours. But I think you'll want to hear us out."

Letting go of Jia, Tingzhe reached into his sleeve, and produced a ribbon-bound scroll. Presented it to Chan, with a professor's rough grace.

Unrolling the scroll, the agent read carefully. Eyes slowly widening, face blanching as he glanced at the scroll's lower left corner.

A thumbprint in blood, Shirong knew. The Earth King's own mark.

Anyone in the Earth Kingdom might sign with a thumbprint. The marks Guanyin left on a person's fingers were unique, a reflection of the spirit in mortal flesh. But all agents knew their king's sign.

Chan lowered the scroll, still pale. "He... *orders* us to remain with the Fire Princess."

"Those who feel they must," Shirong nodded. "Ba Sing Se must be protected from malice. We can't do it if all of us are hiding. You will serve our city with honor." He swept his gaze over the agents in view. "But if any of you have doubts, if you would fight for our kingdom, even at the risk of being hated and hunted - the Earth King needs you. Desperately." He met Chan's gaze again, all too aware of Quan's uneasy silence. "You'd be surprised how much he's learned, just in a few days. Bon seems to have given him some rough lessons in what it's like to be Dai Li. He was startled to hear how the spirits' touch separates us from the rest of the world." Quiet murmurs of disbelief followed that; Shirong shrugged. "Think about it. How would he know? He's been kept away from ordinary people his whole life. Whenever they do show up, they're always in awe because he *is* the king. Of course they're afraid of him!"

Silence. A thoughtful silence. *Please, let this work.*

Chan cleared his throat. "There's also an odd order in here about the library."

"Apparently, the Avatar managed to offend He Who Knows Ten Thousand Things," Tingzhe stated. "He did so to strike against the Fire Nation, and restore balance to the world, but Wan Shi Tong does not seem to *care*. He's been stealing texts and documents that would help the Avatar

ever since. One of his foxes took my form to steal a letter that would give the Avatar insight into who's tried to stop the war in the past, and how he might stop it in the future." He spread empty hands. "If Wan Shi Tong wishes to harm the Avatar, the king wishes to stop him. We will spread knowledge to the four corners of the earth, and hope we succeed." He cleared his throat. "Personally, I think he'd also just like his books. He's holding up well, but he's as adrift outside the Palace as any of you would be outside the Wall. It'd be a kindness to follow that order."

Another long silence, as Chan looked troubled. Shirong shifted as much as he could, knees aching. Soaking in chi from stone helped, but his fellow agents knew too well how to bind someone in a painfully awkward fashion-

The hairs on his neck went straight up, as *something* glowed through the audience room floor.

Chains clashed and rattled, passing through ephemeral robes like so much jade mist. Passing over the dazed boy sprawled on the floor, gasping for breath stone and spirit had denied him-

Min!

Shirong didn't dare look closer, not now. Not with jade-mist robes whispering through air, drifting about a female figure whose unbound hair was peppered with ashes, and whose blind white eyes leaked tears...

Falling to her knees before the empty throne, the spirit keened.

Grief struck Shirong like a thunderbolt. No hope, no warmth, no *life*. Nothing but gray chains of despair; all was set awry, time itself was out of joint. They were grieving, had been grieving, would be grieving forever...

The Palace is empty.

No king dwells within these walls.

The Palace is lost, lost; a haunt for cat-owls and creeping things, to finally wear away as dust in the wind...

The wail vanished. She vanished. Leaving only poor, shattered mortals, trying to breathe life back into their battered souls.

"*Qiè gù gōng yōulíng*," Shirong whispered.

A spirit no Dai Li had ever trained to defeat. That no Dai Li had ever wished to see, she had not been seen in *thousands* of years...

She who only appears if the Imperial Palace is abandoned. If no king rules here, Shirong recalled. The spirits will not recognize Azula as our ruler. No matter what the cost.

Chains fell away from them, and Chan himself lifted Shirong to his feet. "Take them and go," Chan said brusquely. "Go!"

Nodding, Shirong helped Quan upright. Winced inside, at the way Quan swayed on his feet. *He's hurt. Badly. Not bleeding, but... empty.*

Amaya took a deep breath, and straightened. "She'll live." The healer eyed Ty Lee, and Chan. "Let her sleep. Try to give her a restful day so everything can settle. I've healed what I can. Her mind is whole... at least, as whole as it ever was." She shuddered.

"Don't say things like that!" Ty Lee flipped to plant herself between Amaya and the unconscious firebender. "Azula's an amazing person!"

"Amazing, indeed." Amaya stepped back, still eyeing the princess as if she were the deadliest white scorpion-viper. "Tui and La. I would have drowned her in her very cradle."

Rubbing iron-chafed wrists, Mai's head jerked up at that. "She's... not that bad..."

"No. She's worse." Amaya rubbed her hands over each other, face set and determined. Glanced at Ty Lee, and shook her head. "I only hope that one day you see the truth."

And let's hope we're far, far away when that happens, Shirong thought grimly. Yet bleak as that thought was, bleak as their situation might still be-

We're not safe, not yet, we need to get moving-!

-He still had to smile a little as a dazed Min pushed himself off the floor, and looked at his parents, and Mai, and all of them, with awed, amazed hope.

Tingzhe nodded once, a proud smile on his own face. "Let's go home, son."

"-Losing him-"

"-Heal-?"

"-Trying, he needs earth, they've all just started..."

Go away, Quan thought wearily. Dimly aware of a hard stone table under him, voices pleading, hands plucking at his robes... and an oddly soothing grit of sand, humming to itself as it pressed over his heart. *Just let me go*.

He was a traitor. A *contract-breaker*. All he'd done, all he'd hoped to be, was dust on the wind. And he wanted to blow away with it.

I've had enough. Failed enough. Suffered enough...

"No." A young, familiar voice. Though stronger and firmer than he'd ever heard it before. "No, Agent Quan, you haven't. Not yet."

Aching, Quan opened his eyes. The hands on him resolved into the most unlikely faces; Amaya, Shirong, Min, Professor Wen... and spirits, was that Jia?

At the head of Amaya's stone table, Earth King Kuei looked down at him with stern eyes. "You followed Long Feng, and betrayed me."

"Yes," Quan whispered. Why deny it? At least he could be true in death, if not in life.

"You helped Princess Azula occupy our city."

"Yes."

"You threatened Ba Sing Se itself, by weakening the spirit-prisons."

"Yes," Quan admitted quietly.

"And you think dying could possibly make up for that?"

Quan had to look away. "My death is all I have left to offer."

"Oh, monkey-feathers!"

Quan blinked.

"I need every trained earthbender we can save," Kuei said plainly. "Even you. *Especially* you. Who can better advise me how to fight these people, than one who's faced the Fire Princess herself?"

Quan shook his head minutely. "I betrayed you..."

Kuei winced. "You betrayed a king who was in the middle of making a terrible mistake," he admitted, voice pained. "Someone who'd always taken loyal service for granted. Who'd read about what you are, what you do, yet never truly realized what it costs." Kuei swallowed dryly. "I'm trying not to be that king anymore." He narrowed his eyes, trying to look stern. "Am I your king, Agent Quan?"

"Yes, sir," Quan whispered.

"Then accept my judgment." Kuei's face softened, as he touched Quan's brow. "I sentence you to *live*."

Quan's heart seemed to skip a beat. Almost, he could imagine a shimmer around the king, like air wavering over summer-roasted rocks. Like the ancient tales, of the kings who'd caught and married the wild enchantresses of the sands, bringing the strength of the desert into the very heart of Ba Sing Se. *But that was ages ago. Impossible.* "It's... not that easy..."

"On the contrary, young man." Professor Wen's voice was worn, but he looked wearily triumphant as he lifted a sand-dusted hand away. "I think you may find it is exactly that easy."

The earthbenders stepped back, leaving Amaya clear to touch Quan's heart and head.

Quan shivered. Amaya's touch didn't feel like water, or sand, or any element he could name. More like someone reaching *inside* his skin. Sharing it, just for a heartbeat.

She lifted her hands away, relieved. "Rest," Amaya directed. "Don't bend more than you must for at least a week. Your spirit is whole, but your chi is worn thin. Don't try to fight a spirit. Let other Dai Li handle it." She paused. "And don't pray to any great spirits that aren't of earth. There could be... consequences."

Shirong winced. Quan raised an eyebrow, absently wondering if he could muster the energy to sit up.

"Consequences?" Kuei asked, worried.

"It's difficult to explain." Amaya glanced at Min. "The same goes for you, young man. That metal starved you, and I know you could have been reaching for... more."

Quan levered himself up, ignoring the dizziness. Shirong *knew* something. As did Professor Wen, and even Min himself looked as though he'd put a few facts together. "We've imprisoned earthbenders in steel before," Quan pointed out. "There have never been consequences. Besides the usual." Despair, madness, death. A predictable progression. Nothing that would cause any other healer he knew to advise *not* bending, if you escaped that fate.

Professor Wen made a startled noise of comprehension. "Of course. Ritual starvation, for a spirit-quest; the texts say the shamans of old would do that to - gain more power..."

"Power over the spirits?" Quan ventured. Amaya said he'd live, and he believed her. But the headache had him almost wishing he wouldn't. *They're hiding something. From my king. I can't let this go.*

"Sometimes," Kuei spoke up, startling him. "Shamans are meant to deal with spirits. But sometimes, if their people needed it, they'd seek other powers. To call down storms, or quell floods, or walk unharmed through raging fires..." Behind glass, his eyes widened. "Yāorén! Of course. They were yāorén!"

You could have heard a pebble drop.

They know, Quan realized, looking over the motley band of rescuers. *They know what he's talking about.*

"I'm sorry, of course you wouldn't know," Kuei waved it off. "It's in the ancient books. They're the most accurate, at least; any stories written after Avatar Yangchen... well, they tend to confuse the Avatar's advisers with spirits in human form. Or just imply the Avatar did it all. Which is ridiculous. Even on a flying bison, how could the Avatar be in two places at once? And-" He shook his head, smiling ruefully. "Never mind. Agent Quan, please follow Healer Amaya's advice. If the spirits decided to bring back a legend, I have no idea where to look for the spirit-healer you'd need-"

"You could be one."

Kuei stared at Amaya. "I'm not even a bender!"

"Not of the four elements," the waterbender acknowledged. "But you are a spirit-bender, your majesty. I felt you reach for Quan's, when you helped us hold him to life." She nodded. "I don't know how much time I'll have to teach you. But the basics of spirit-healing, I can show you. And I will."

"Oh," Kuei said, in a very quiet voice. "That is... that would be... thank you."

Smiling, Amaya inclined her head.

"But even if she can teach me," Kuei turned to Quan, "you'd need another teacher. And we have one waterbender, and no firebenders we can trust, and there's only one airbender anywhere. It wouldn't be wise."

"A teacher?" Quan said warily. The Earth King couldn't mean what he seemed to be implying. Impossible.

Kuei looked abashed. "I know it sounds like something out of a spirit-tale, but... well, yāorén *are* out of spirit-tales. The Avatar's helpers. Benders who can mediate with some spirits themselves. Or fight them, like the Dai Li. Though they have an advantage, if they're trained, because they can strike with two..." Words died in Kuei's throat, as he turned a disbelieving gaze on Amaya. "Lee is Fire Nation. And a waterbender. Is he... he couldn't be..."

A silence of exchanged glances, and Quan knew. *Every* child of the house of Sozin was a firebender. Every. Last. One. Yet if the reports of what had happened at the Wen house were true - hot water, *possibly*. But what firebender could bend *ice*?

"Lee is a yāorén, your majesty," Shirong said quietly. "And... so am I." A deep breath-

And his hand cradled fire.

Quan blanched, feeling the room sway around him. *This can't be happening. It can't.*

Flames flickered out with Shirong's sigh. "As you said, we have no firebending master here. Lee was teaching me, but - I only knew what I'd become a day before everything fell apart. And Lee..."

"My apprentice drowned under my hands a little more than a month ago," Amaya said simply.

"He's worked hard to learn, even when he was terrified of what happened to him. But we haven't had enough time."

"Terrified?" Kuei objected. "This is a gift from the spirits!"

"None of us knew that," Amaya said sharply. "He was born a *firebender*. In a land whose idiot of a Fire Lord teaches every other form of bending is *inferior*. He was scared half to death! Mushi barely found scraps of a tale that gave us a name for... for what had happened." She shook her head. "But we'd thought the spirits could only take a hand if someone were gravely wounded."

"Well - those are the strongest yāorén, in the tales," Kuei managed, eyes still wide. "The warriors. The ones the spirits set between us and harm. But the stories say some benders went on spirit-quests to *become* yāorén. Though it was risky. You could die. Even if you didn't, it didn't always work. And the ones who lived... well, they weren't who you might expect." He gave Shirong a shaky smile. "If spirit-torn yāorén are lion-dogs, questing yāorén were cricket-mice. They were healers." He rubbed his head. "*Lee* is a yāorén? He seems so young..."

"Was," Quan said soberly, heart aching for Kuei. He didn't know what the spirits had been thinking to give that kind of power to an heir of Sozin. But the Earth King had known only a young healer, who'd tried to help.

"Is," Shirong said simply.

No. Not possible, Quan thought. He broke his loyalty - he had to, to act against the Fire Lord, and attack his own sister!

Min swallowed audibly, eyeing the adults as if he couldn't believe Shirong was serious. "Azula said he was dead."

"Azula," his father said gravely, "makes a mistake all too common among the most gifted. She believes that if she could not see a solution, no one could."

"Don't underestimate her." Amaya shivered. "I touched her spirit, not her mind, but... she's a knife of glacier ice. Hard. Sharp. *Focused*. We dealt with her when she'd been blunted by injury; a blow that would have killed most of us, and left the rest of us delirious and raving. And she still nearly had us all." The healer drew a breath, mastering her fear. "But your father is right. She may be a genius, but she still makes mistakes. Lee is alive."

"And bringing us a ship," Shirong smirked.

"A ship?" Quan echoed, aghast. "How? He's-"

Shirong winked at him.

Exiled, Quan bit back, seeing pure mischief in Shirong's gaze. What in the world are you up to?

"A ship?" Kuei looked dismayed. "There's nothing in the plans about a ship!"

"Not yet," Shirong smirked. "That's why we should sleep on it, your majesty. Tomorrow is going to be *interesting*."

Chapter End Notes

gǔ gé nǚ = "skeleton female"; from the Japanese hone-onna (skeleton woman)
bǎi yǎn lián = "hundred eyes"; from the Japanese hyakume - creature with 100 eyes.
mián cháng = "cotton formerly"; from the Japanese ittan-momen - cloth, smothers by wrapping around people's faces.

qiè gù gōng yōu líng = "abandoned Imperial Palace specter"; from the Japanese aonyoubou - female ghost who lurks in an abandoned imperial palace.

For all you out there poking at it, I am grinning like a maniac every time I check the Tropes page. :)

Plothole mentioned about Teruko... it was Jee's POV, and she was speaking to her superior officer on a subject that was very shaky ground. Whatever Sozin might have done to the dragons, he was publicly considered a hero for removing the "airbender threat". And while Teruko may have a serious allergy to lies, she can shade the truth.

Letter length to Iroh versus Katara: to someone who really cares about you, all you need to say is, "I'm sorry". Possibly augmented with, "I was an idiot and I won't do that again". It's your enemies you need to handle with long, careful speeches. Zuko focuses on Katara because she's the linchpin of the Gaang. Get her pointed one direction, the rest tend to follow.

And here, with your kind forbearance, I'll tread onto a bit shakier ground. Tolkien spent years telling people the War of the Ring had nothing to do with the atomic bomb, or WWII in general. Let me make a simple statement likewise in regard to nuclear weapons, WWII, or the War on Terror, so far as Embers is concerned. I'm reaching a bit farther back in history, to - among other things - the Roman Empire, the Mongols, the Japanese invasion of Korea, and many, many other historical messes.

(If I were referencing the War on Terror at all, I'd be listing books by Robert Spencer, Bat Ye'or, Mark Steyn, Nonie Darwish, Bruce Bawer, and Melanie Phillips. Among others. Many others. Go ahead. Check them out.)

In myth and folklore, spiritual pollution, hauntings, and monsters are common effects from scenes of violent battle, violent death, and unhallowed burial. Given we are explicitly shown in canon that proper burial for the Fire Nation involves cremation, then as far as evil effects on the spirits go, Koizilla pulled off a hat trick. (Yes, there were also firebender skeletons at the Southern Air Temple. I'd imagine Sozin wanted that place to stay cursed.) Look up Shinto. Heck, look up Irish and Scottish legends of battlefields.

There's also a common theme in folklore and fantasy that while the ghost of someone who died in a "fair fight" can be cranky, the ghost of someone who died from something they had absolutely no chance against - be that magic, poison, or ambush - is downright murderous. Robert E. Howard has some great short stories on that. I

recommend Shadow Kingdoms, which has among other stories "Skulls in the Stars", "Rattle of Bones", and "Dead Man's Hate".

In short, for someone canon sets up as Super-Shaman, Koizilla was an extremely dumb thing to do.

And Koh deliberately ran out the clock so Aang would do it.

The hallmark of a Xanatos Gambit is that *all outcomes produce a win*. Aang loses his cool and loses his face? Win. Aang gets delayed long enough that the Fire Nation wipes out the Northern Water Tribe? Win. Aang and the Ocean Spirit shred the Fire Navy, giving the whole Fire Nation reason to personally hate his guts (as opposed to just "because he's the Avatar") and smearing spiritual pollution all the way from the "most spiritual place in the entire North Pole" through the Ocean itself? Win.

And if I were going to reference Hiroshima and Nagasaki - first, I suggest you look up General Tojo Hideki's February 1944 "emergency declaration", which effectively called for the mass suicide of the entire Japanese population (plus Koreans and Taiwanese) in the event of defeat. Think about the options the Allies would have had to consider, to prevent that from happening.

Second, I direct you to this information, available at this site, among others. (Take out the spaces.)

ww2db image. php?image_id=7350

"On August 1, 1945, five days before the bombing of Hiroshima, the U.S. Army Air Force dropped over one million leaflets over Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and 33 other Japanese cities warning that those cities were going to be destroyed within a few days and advising the residents to leave to save their lives...."

...So. Make up your own minds where Aang falls on the scale of idealism vs. cynicism. The fact remains that whatever Zhao did, the rest of his fleet thought this was an ordinary invasion they were going to win by force of arms, not by going after the Moon Spirit. They had no warning, before Koizilla smashed them into bits.

You decide whether they deserved one.

Chapter 35

"Oh, *that* doesn't look ominous," Jee said dryly, staring at the trails of smoke rising from the distant city.

From his perch on the observation deck, the harbor itself looked mostly calm. *Mostly* being a flexible term; Jee had sailed into enough recently pacified ports to know one when he saw it. The furtive looks, the heads kept down; the way sailors casually lingered near tie-downs, where a sharp blade might turn a peaceably secured ship into one that could cast off in moments. The Fire Nation's grip here was firm, but not secure. Not yet.

This is more than just the tension of a conquest. Something's happened. Something bad.

Well. It was good to know Donghai's information was solid. So far, at least.

They'd met the smirking Earth Kingdom smuggler in the dark of the ghost watch; a lean whip of a man with a ship that looked like a floating disaster and moved like an eel through the lake. Just what a man would want for moving cargoes that couldn't risk coming near official channels.

As his latest had been. Though it was a very small cargo. A bundle of letters and maps, weighted only with treason.

Or loyal resistance. Depending on whose side you were on.

"I'm on mine, what do you think?" Donghai had snorted when Jee gave him a pointed look. "War, no war - shale and shards, business is going to be even better with the skull-faces locking the port down. But Shirong's okay. For a Dai Li. Got my first mate out of a mess with a... um. Trust me. You don't want to know. *I* don't want to know." He shivered, and tried to cover it with a cynical look. "So like I said, he's not bad. Understands about... trade. And that sometimes a man has to make compromises to get something useful out of the enemy." He gave Jee just as sharp a look back.

Jee had found himself hiding a smile, then. He might not have seen it when he was a younger man. Might not have recognized it even today, if he hadn't dealt with a certain angry prince. But under all the sarcasm and attitude of a man out to make a profit from both sides, was someone Agent Shirong had trusted to put the Earth Kingdom *first*. Even if it meant consorting with their mortal enemies.

I hope he's as good at sneaking back into port as he was sneaking out, Jee thought now. *Sergeant Kyo's good, but even he says inside help is what we need. There aren't enough of us to crew enough ships. Even if we all knew how to sail.*

A fair number of his crew did. Saburo, Teruko; he could lay his hands on half a hundred files of the most unlikely sailors. Mixing firebenders and wooden ships was enough to turn a sane man's hair white - but the older domains gritted their teeth and did it anyway. Steel ships and coal went to the war first, and fish didn't catch themselves.

Ba Sing Se fished as well, but they didn't rely on it. Or General Iroh's siege would have had a far different outcome.

Jee lifted his gaze from the harbor's fishing fleet to the unimaginable breadth of green fields between here and the city itself. Farms and crops to support not only the uncounted millions inside the Inner Wall of Ba Sing Se, but the bulk of the Earth Army as well. The sheer wealth of what

Princess Azula had captured made his mind reel. With those supplies diverted to Fire Nation use instead...

Well. He felt considerably less conflicted about the *resupply* part of the prince's plan. Even if it *had* been lifted straight out of *waegu* raids.

Staring over ordered, endless squares of green, Jee had to shake his head. "You could lose small armies out there." Recalled who was standing next to him, wrapped in a concealing red cloak. "Sorry, sir."

"Not just small ones," General Iroh said mildly, lowering his spyglass. "No need for apologies. The Fire Nation lost much here, least of all my pride. I believed this city could be taken by rightful force of arms. I was mistaken, and we all paid a heavy price. If only I had come to wisdom sooner." He sighed. "Let that be a lesson, Captain. If the spirits grant us a vision, they do so for their goals, not ours."

"And the prince's vision?" Jee said carefully.

"Ah. That, I have far more faith in. For it is *not* a vision." The general smiled wryly. "It is a plan. His plan. And while many of my nephew's plans have not reached their intended goal, they have kept him and those he cares for alive. And this one, he has had *time* to create."

Which should have helped cut down on what Lieutenant Teruko had sheepishly admitted was one of the worst flaws of dragon-children: find, fix, kill. It didn't *sound* like a flaw, not in a marine...

Or at least, it hadn't. Until Teruko had told him the other, major problem dragon-children had hanging onto sanity.

"*We can't fly, sir.*"

A statement that had seemed utterly obvious. Outside of a few legendary master benders like Jeong Jeong, back when that general had been inclined to show off crushing the Fire Nation's foes, *no* human could fly.

"*Sir, a grounded dragon is in trouble. Sick. Hurt. Protecting eggs. Which means you find the most obvious threat and you kill it dead. Because you can't get away.*"

Which explained an uncomfortable amount of the prince's - *and* his lieutenant's - behavior. If not the tavern torchings.

"...Um, no. *That's just guys getting to me. Sir.*"

Well. Knowing why Prince Zuko tended to focus on one target *would* be useful. If only to soothe nerves jangled by the fact that he had on board a bender who could move an *entire supply ship*.

One of these days, he might even be able to think about that. Without desperately wanting a drink.

Focus on now. "You'd better head below, General."

"Yes, that would be wise," the general nodded. "Good luck, Captain."

"Thank you, sir." *We're all going to need it.*

Not least here and now, as helm and lookouts guided the *Suzuran* to the best berthing they could find. The lakes were more than deep enough to allow free sailing, but Ba Sing Se's harbor had been

built with ferries and junks in mind; shallower vessels, moving mostly under the power of wind. And what a few rebellious earthbenders might be able to do to channels marked as clear... Brr.

Though before General Gang's attack on *Suzuran*, earthbenders Jee had run into had lacked the reach - or possibly, the imagination - to raise a lakebed while they were standing on its shore. And none of Gang's men should have made it here. Still, he couldn't help but wonder if somewhere, sometime, *someone* had found the guts to just hold their breath and dive.

Then again, given Earth Kingdom policy on destroying innovative firebenders... if he were an earthbender who'd come up with a new tactic, *he'd* keep it quiet. Just in case.

Which is a damn shame, Jee mused. *There's no honor in fighting an enemy who's crippled himself.*

Not that war was ever about honor, but... There. Jee let out a quiet, relieved breath, as *Suzuran's* engines wound down and the ship ghosted neatly into place alongside a floating pier. New; an Army construction, and not nearly the solid structure he would have liked to load from. But it would do.

It has to.

And there was the welcoming committee, just as expected. Mostly in red armor... yet there were a few in the city's green and dun as well. Interesting.

How strong is Azula's grip on command and communication? What gaps can we find - or create?

Time to encourage a few, here and now.

He didn't wait for any official summons; simply gripped one of the outer ladders and slid down to the main deck, timing it to march up and nod to the harbormaster just as the younger officer was about to open his mouth. "Welcome aboard, Lieutenant. I'm glad to see your commanders are following up on our report on the Avatar's bison so quickly."

"Captain Jee, you had no orders to bring *Suzuran* into Ba Sing- *what* did you say?"

"We sighted the Avatar's bison," Jee stated matter-of-factly, letting a slight hint of surprise cross his face. "Rendezvousing with the Water Tribe fleet, apparently. We thought we'd caught up to them but - well, let's just say General Gang's army regretted catching us. Unfortunately, as you know, the tribesmen were able to escape in the confusion..." Jee let his words trail off, as the harbormaster's jaw dropped. "Oh, damn. Don't tell me... Agni, we never got any message to compartmentalize that! Standing orders are that possible sightings of the Avatar are to be broadcast to all forces!"

Which set off a flurry of quoted regulations, demands for ship's logs, communications sent up to the Palace, shore patrol ordered on board to inspect the ship, and Agni alone knew what else.

In all the confusion of uniforms coming and going, no one noticed a few sailors and marines quietly slipping off to scout the harbor. Even Jee didn't quite know when one particular pair of armored firebenders ghosted away. One moment they were on deck being dressed down by patrollers; the next - gone.

Keep him safe, Teruko. If anyone can.

We're all gonna die.

"Relax, Lieutenant," Sergeant Kyo murmured. "We're just sightseeing."

Right, Sadao thought morbidly, keeping pace with the sergeant as the rest of the knot of mayhem-bent marines peeled off to saunter through the docks. *Just seeing the sights of the ships we're going to steal right out from under the Army's nose.*

At least nothing had caught fire around him. Yet.

Actually, nothing had *accidentally* caught fire around him for days. It was weird. Almost as weird as healing.

...Not that there was anything *wrong* with healing. Once he'd finally gotten his head around that odd push-pull pattern of the prince's, fire had been eager to do what he wanted. Sure, it took the kind of patience you needed to read wind and waves when you weren't sure of your charts. The ruthless determination you needed to kill flames in the first place. And the same balance of caring and calculation you used to lead men where any sane civilian would fear to tread. But once you had all that down, it was scarily easy.

For once, he was *good* at something. And nobody had even hinted at throwing him off the ship.

In his darker moments, that scared him stiff.

Though at least he wasn't really here to lead Sergeant Kyo, and they both knew it. Just... advising. Because given marines tended to be more in the business of sinking ships than sailing them, Captain Jee wanted a few second opinions on the vessels they were about to steal.

...Er, *commandeer*. Sort of. In a way. Oh, Agni...

"Well?" The sergeant raised an eyebrow as they made their way past old sailors mending nets, a stray woman of ill repute hurrying away, two passable fishing boats that were beginning to stink of their early-morning catch, and one dry-rotted wreck that should have been burned to put it out of an honest sea's misery.

"I think it's a good thing the Western Lake ships haven't been committed over here yet," Sadao said in an undertone. "We're going to have to get past them. If we get out of here in the first place. And there's *nothing* here with that kind of speed."

"Nothing, huh kid?" An amused voice spoke out of a net-cast shadow.

Gaah! No fire no fire-

"Breathe, Lieutenant," Sergeant Kyo advised, planting himself between Sadao and the weather-beaten whip of a man smirking at them. "Captain Donghai. You're early."

"You're earlier," Donghai said dryly. "A guy might think you didn't trust your own plan."

"Plans always go wrong," Kyo said, just as dry. "Are you in or out?"

"To the point. I like that." Donghai shrugged. "I'm thinking about it. First, I need to know what you've got." He eyed Sadao. "Nothing?"

"Maybe a few of those nobles' junks down near the city-side," Sadao shrugged, uneasy. "But if they lose the wind, they're dead in the water." *Emphasis on dead*. "And we don't have anyone who can sail them."

"Not in our crew," the sergeant nodded. "Have to admit, those ferries are a bit more our speed."

"Except speed is exactly what they don't have," Sadao said unhappily. "And if we do get through the Western Lake? *Rivers*, Sergeant. *Suzuran* can take it; we've got a strong hull, and charts with the current deep channels. Those ferries?" He winced just thinking about it.

"One step at a time," the sergeant advised. "First, we need to get people out."

Donghai looked between them both, dark brows climbing toward his hair. "You really mean it." His voice was troubled, thoughtful. "You're really planning to get people out of here."

Sadao nodded; sure in himself of this, at least. "If we can."

Donghai looked at them, then inland, where eyes dazzled by sun off the harbor could just make out a few occupation komodo-rhinos. "You're dead men walking."

"No," Sadao said, surprising himself. "No, we're not. We've got a chance. It's not a *good* chance. But we have surprise, and we'll have speed. And... other resources, the rest of the Army doesn't. We can do this. We can save these people." He met Donghai's brown gaze, trying to be open and honest as sunlight. "We could use your help."

"And if you're as slippery as I think you are," Sergeant Kyo stuck in, voice wry, "no one's ever going to know you had anything to do with it."

Donghai took a step back. Chewed on his lip. Frowned, eyes down and thinking. Looked back at them, calculation lighting his eyes. "Hate to say it, but those junks aren't mine."

"Ferries," Sadao sighed.

"Didn't think they were, Captain," Sergeant Kyo agreed. "Though given both of your opinions, I have to say I'm a bit more interested in those junks now than I was when our Lee first brought them up." His smile had a predatory edge. "After all, if Lee can make contact with... our soon to be associate, we could have *papers* to sort out that inconvenient detail of who owns what. Or who gets to *borrow* what." He smirked. "I know you people like your paperwork."

"Borrow?" Donghai pounced on that like a cat on a scorpion-viper.

Kyo shrugged slightly. "You think this is going to work if there's a ship left in port to catch us?"

Donghai looked at them. And their armor. And the wooden, *flammable* ships currently at dock. "...*Borrow*. Right." He chuckled, shaking his head at them both. "And people call me a crook."

"It's all a matter of scale, Captain," Kyo stated. "So what can we do for each other?"

"Give me an hour to find some people." Still smirking, Donghai sauntered off.

"Think we can trust him?" Sadao whispered once the man was out of sight.

"Lee's friend thought we could," Kyo observed. "Let's hope he was as right about that as he was about Lee."

Sadao swallowed dryly, thinking of the prince. "Can he do it, Sergeant? I know he can meet - our contact." Even if their prince had to sneak through a whole city occupied by enemies. Who just happened to be their people. "But convince him? When we're - who we are?"

"Don't forget who *he* is, Lieutenant," Sergeant Kyo said wryly. "He's young. He'll never be

charming. But he's got his uncle's training... and never forget what that family is *trained* to do." He chuckled quietly. "Our earthy friend will never know what hit him."

"I never would have dreamed it was this big." Teruko shook her head as they strode through the Lower Ring. "And this... quiet."

Too quiet, Zuko thought, silent behind a skull faceplate. Streets leading into mazes of streets, large as anything in the capital's great caldera. Streets he knew better than the capital itself, he realized with a shock, for when had a prince's son ever wandered the back alleys alone? Ranks of familiar tenements rose around them; he knew from the light and shadows they should be swarming with people coming off of night work or leaving late for the morning. Now they stood locked and barred, quieted by the thud of patrolling komodo-rhinos. The taste of wet-wood smoke clung to the back of his throat, tainted with the odd grate that was shattered rock dust in the breeze.

There were people in the streets, despite the troops. Shops were open, goods and coin exchanging hands. But he could *hear* the fear, in the wail of babies kept carefully out of sight.

Children. It made him want to snarl. *Agni, what kind of monsters do they think we are?*

What the rest of the Earth Kingdom tells them we are, a more practical part of him pointed out. *The beasts the Dai Li - the ones they fear, and hate - wouldn't talk about. Except to imply they protect them from us. So we have to be worse.*

Not rational. But Uncle had hammered home years ago that a lot of people *weren't* rational, and *didn't* check their facts against reality. Plenty of people just did what they wanted, and figured out reasons why it "made sense" later. The Fire Nation was invading. Of course people were afraid of them.

And they've got reason to be, he admitted grudgingly. *These troops aren't under Uncle's command. They're under Azula's. She's not stupid, she won't execute people without cause-*

But she'd find cause. Plenty of it. And... he knew, from what had happened to Ping, even some of his own people had no honor.

It hurt.

I'm going to change that, he swore. *I will. One step at a... uh-oh.*

They'd rounded a corner from just subdued into actively *quiet*, drifts of smoke still smoldering from what had been a shattered tenement. One floor had collapsed into another, charred remnants of the roof clawing at the sky like blackened bones. A few former residents huddled in numb clumps on other tenement stoops, rough blankets flung around them against shock. The street itself was cracked down the middle as if by a great earthquake, half of it inches above the other.

The master sergeant heading their way on foot was obviously tired, cranky, and about one good snarl away from finding someone to shred who truly deserved it. His hair was gray with ash as well as age, there were still traces of soot on his uniform, and he had both troops and Guards drawing near with one brusque, beckoning hand. Some of them, very familiar Guards.

Let them just see the armor.

"Master Sergeant Yakume," he identified himself. "A bit far from your ship, aren't you, marine?"

"Lieutenant Teruko, of *Suzuran*." She took off her faceplate; proper politeness of higher-ranked to

lower. "No offense, but we could see from the water you'd had some trouble up here." She gestured toward torn rocks, smoking rubble, the faintly red wet stains on the street where someone had washed blood away. "Captain Jee asked us to take a look. And, orders permitting, offer our assistance."

Some of the Guards snorted at that. But not all. Especially not one mountain of a man in uniform just a bit more ornate than the rest.

Captain Lu-shan, Zuko realized, recognizing Huojin's description of the man. And it looks like...

Well. To be honest, it didn't look like he *trusted* the master sergeant. But the way he stood, casually confident that no attack was coming from Yakume's direction... it didn't look like he *didn't*, either.

Somehow, I don't think that's what the Earth King had in mind.

Despite his grumbling temper, despite the gnawing worry of *what if Azula spots us*, Zuko still felt sorry for Kuei. The Earth King knew the palace, his guards, and his Dai Li. Maybe some of his nobles as well. But that was it.

And that missed so much of the world, it wasn't funny.

He doesn't know ordinary people. Ordinary lives.

And the Dai Li, who could at least have given him an idea of what normal had been for them, had followed Long Feng's lead and kept the Earth King at a reverent distance. And they didn't talk about what they really did with people, and spirits. Or why.

Zuko had read Shirong's report, but he had to admit, he hadn't grasped all the implications. Not until now. Kuei had made, or approved, a plan to wreak havoc all over the city. To break some of the Earth Army loose, and otherwise mess with the Fire Nation's occupation. And it had worked.

...Except the Earth King didn't *know* what it was like to have your world burned down around you. Or what happened to people who fought to survive, together. Whether or not they *liked* each other.

Most places in the city, it wouldn't make a difference. The hatred would be too deep; Fire Nation officers and men would be careless, or arrogant enough to scorn their conquered foes as subjects instead of citizens. But here...

In the ashes and outrage, Zuko could taste *potential*.

"*You'd* help us, Lieutenant?" the captain said gracelessly. "I doubt we need any more fires set around here."

Zuko straightened, and held back a thoughtful nod. *The master sergeant's found a crack. And he's going to keep tapping wedges into it.*

Teruko let out a slow breath, that just steamed slightly. "Sir, *Suzuran* has no reports on what happened here, so I know the captain would want me to *reserve judgment*." Her eyes narrowed a little on that; slowly, relaxed. "We have trained field medics on board. Burn medications. People who can set a damn broken arm. Obviously, we can't send our medics into what may still be a hostile situation." She looked straight at Yakume. "But if it would be worthwhile to you for us to offload certain supplies, or for you to send civilians *to* the docks, if they've been cleared..."

Yakume arched a brow, considering that. "*Suzuran*. Captain Jee, isn't it? I hear he served under

General Iroh."

Zuko kept himself from stiffening with an effort. *I don't like this.*

"Not quite accurate, sir," Teruko said politely. "I understand he chose to travel on the ship Captain Jee was master of, but the chain of command was... otherwise arranged."

"Rumor often exaggerates," Yakume mused. "I also hear your ship survived the North Pole."

Zuko listened to the sudden, attentive silence among troops and bystanders. And bit back a curse. *I really don't like this.*

"Yes, we did," Teruko said bluntly. "I almost feel sorry for the Water Tribe."

"You? Feel sorry for them?" Lu-shan looked caught between amusement and disgust. "I hear your precious fleet got *wiped out*."

He's pushing. And Yakume's letting him. Zuko scowled behind the mask, irritation bleeding into something darker. *He's holding the occupation here, he's just gotten people working together - now he wants to see how we'll handle them.*

Damn it. If he'd been trying to hold the city - in the long run, yes, this would be good for the soldiers stationed here. Even good for the civilians; if Yakume was trying to build a working relationship between soldiers and Guards, then he meant to carry out the obligations of an honorable soldier. But he really didn't need this. Not here, not now. Even if they'd been regular troops, this would be a bad idea, and marines were *known* for being testy on land...

You want to show the Guard you're standing with them no matter what idiots come onto shore leave here. Argh. We're an "object lesson"-

Rage shook him, then; he held onto it with finger and thumb pressed carefully together, focusing on that pressure-near-pain. Blow this, and everything failed. *Everything.*

I am so, so tired of being someone else's lesson.

Teruko smiled, just a little. It wasn't pretty. "*Suzuran* wasn't the only ship to sail away from that battle. Intact. So you might want to rethink any rumors you might have heard on how *wiped out* we were. Because if we *had* been wiped out, if we'd lost as many thousands of souls as I hear Earth Kingdom rumors say... well, I'd think any city that deals with spirits as much as Ba Sing Se would be a *little* more worried. After all, that would mean thousands of bodies in the water, condemned to sink without proper burial. People killed *by a spirit*. The Ocean himself, tainted by human rage." Her voice dropped, almost a whisper. "And Fire Nation ghosts don't fear the sun."

Face neutral again, she turned back to Yakume. "Did you need anything else, Master Sergeant?"

"Just for you to watch your step, Lieutenant," Yakume said dryly. "We had some unrest last night, and I'd hate to have to tell your captain you walked into another patch of it. Especially with a youngster tagging along."

"Newbies have to learn sometime," Teruko shrugged. "Move it, Private. We've got work to do."

She enjoyed that, Zuko thought grumpily, as they marched away. Rolled his eyes behind the faceplate, and set the irritation aside. It'd worked. That was all that mattered.

At least, he hoped it'd worked. Something about the way Yakume had said *youngster*...

That... can't have been what I think it was, Yakume thought to himself, making his way into Lu-shan's office with a feeling of relief. Carefully hidden relief; yes, the captain had been working with him so far, and yes, inside the Guard station *was* somewhat safer than out on the street. But this was still occupied territory, with all the hazards that implied.

"So marines are touchy on shore, are they?" Captain Lu-shan asked dryly.

Yakume kept his face neutral and alert, even if exhaustion dragged at him like iron chains. Damned if he'd show that in front of the Earth Kingdom.

And Lu-shan likely thinks the same of the Fire Nation, and we'll just keep going until one of us can find an excuse to collapse in private, Yakume thought wryly. "Usually, they are." That this Lieutenant Teruko wasn't... could mean many things. None of them good for those under his care.

"Would your people really do something like that?" Lu-shan sat down behind his desk, grimacing just a little as bruises and burns complained. "Leave unhallowed graves? That's-" He shrugged, a wordless movement of horror, disgust, and amazement that anyone could be that stupid.

Yakume claimed his own chair, sternly denying his own wincing. "That's difficult to say."

"Difficult?" Lu-shan repeated, incredulous. "Either you lay soldiers to rest, or you *don't*."

"And if we were Earth Kingdom, that would be the whole of it," Yakume agreed. "You have your military doctrine, and you hold to it. Ours... changes. Depending on the commander, on the troops - on many things." He paused. "I can attest that while General Iroh was in command, cremations were held whenever possible. Even under the most extreme battlefield conditions, we kept a ceremonial flame for ghosts to find their way home."

"Huh." Lu-shan weighed him in his gaze. "I hear a *but*."

"I have heard of other commanders less honorable," Yakume said bluntly. "I have *heard* - rumors, you understand - of certain battlefields Fire Lords wished to *remain* cursed." He sighed. "Though in this case, rumors may not make much difference. What do you know about the North Pole?"

"The Northern Water Tribe lives up there, and it's cold," Lu-shan said warily. "Why?"

Yakume inclined his head. "I'm Army. I've never been on any scouting missions into polar waters. But I've read our texts. Take the coldest winter you've ever felt in Ba Sing Se; when your breath frosts, and snow clings instead of melting, and you feel as though you'll never be warm again." He regarded Lu-shan steadily. "Take that, and realize that at the North Pole, that's a balmy summer's day."

"Spirits," Lu-shan muttered.

"The Water Tribe lives on ice as much as land," Yakume went on. "Their main city is on the edge of an island, so they can pasture their reindeer-yak inland. Not that it's easy to tell there's any dirt there, given all the ice... The charts we have indicate the sea floor drops away very quickly. If ships went down... They're in hundreds of feet of water, if not thousands. Even if the water were warm enough *not* to die in minutes - no one can dive for the bodies. Not even part of one."

"But there's still that... ceremonial flame," Lu-shan pointed out.

"And if anyone in command has a modicum of compassion and good sense, someone's infiltrated close enough to the North Pole to burn one," Yakume said soberly. "If the Water Tribe hasn't

caught them at it, *if* the ghosts are willing to be pacified in the first place..."

Lu-shan's brows rose a little in surprise at that qualification, but he let it rest. "So why tell me this, Master Sergeant? I doubt your commanders would like *conquered natives* to know one of their soldiers has *doubts*."

Agni, he had a headache. "Captain Lu-shan, I am responsible for keeping the peace here." *Be blunt. They never understand this, not at first.* "The moment Ba Sing Se was taken by Princess Azula, this city became part of the Fire Nation. As a soldier in the Fire Army, I have a duty to protect the Fire Nation. And its citizens. *All* of them."

Lu-shan's brows were climbing toward his hair. He straightened, weariness banished by amazement.

"I may not like you, or your ways, or what your people think of mine," Yakume went on, almost growling. "I know damn well there are too many of my fellow soldiers who refuse to respect a defeated enemy. *Far* too many, since General Iroh retired. But none of what I *know* or *like* changes what *is*. I have my duty. I *will* carry it out. So long as I am ordered to hold here, *you are under my protection*." He let a breath pass, and a wry smile touch his face. "I'm an old soldier, Captain. I find I can't change my ways, simply because a new commander finds them... less than convenient."

"You didn't set those fires." Lu-shan chewed on that conclusion, evidently not liking the taste. "But why would- Oma and Shu, why am I even asking? If the Dai Li missed a general, he'd just keep doing what they always do. Fight the war, and shatter the rest of us." Another frown, and he eyed Yakume again. "Shame you're on the other side."

"I'd say the same for you," Yakume said dryly. "But in the Fire Nation... Well. Over the years, I've found that what we consider an honorable opponent does bear some resemblance to one of your kingdom's - *limited aid agreements*, I think is the correct term."

Lu-shan's attention fixed on him like a lodestone. "Keep talking."

"We recognize that we have a common goal, and agree to cooperate to make that goal possible," Yakume stated. "In our case, the peace and safety of this part of the Lower Ring. We *trust* that each of us puts that goal *first* - and if one of us no longer can, he will have the honor and decency to inform the other."

"You want to make a deal." Lu-shan looked troubled. "Fire Nation can't hold to deals."

"We aren't harmed by breaking them as you are," Yakume acknowledged. "Just as you aren't harmed by... well. You wouldn't believe me if I told you." He shrugged, as if it were of no consequence, stiff muscles complaining with every move. "But we can hold to them. Though only our honor and word binds us, not our very nature. So I would never demand you make a deal with me, Captain Lu-shan. But if you gave me your word we had common interests..."

"Huh." With a thoughtful frown, Lu-shan leaned back.

He's thinking. That's all I can ask for now. "Whatever you decide, we should both try to get some rest. Things are going to get very busy soon."

Lu-shan was good, very good; the result of decades keeping peace as a Guard. Unease barely flickered in his eyes. "You think that lieutenant might be back?" He snorted. "What are you people thinking, letting a woman in your army? What if she gets captured?"

"If she did, and her captors were determined to do anything inhumane, she would endure," Yakume

said coldly. "And when we came for her - for we *do not* leave our people behind - she would have all the comrades she needed to *burn them alive*." He stared the man down. "Lieutenant Teruko would be the first to tell you, she is not a *woman*. She is a *marine*."

"...You people are crazy."

"Thank you," Yakume said, amused. "I'm apparently in good company."

"What?"

"Captain Lu-shan," Yakume said dryly, "we both know that *you* know, one of the line of Sozin is on that ship."

Surprise. Anger. Resignation. "So what are you going to do about it?" Lu-shan said flatly. "Just hand the boy over to that flame-witch who took our city? Oma and Shu, I wouldn't hand *you* over to her!"

Training, years on the battlefield, will and talent channeled to hold steady - despite it all, Yakume froze. He'd meant General Iroh. But what Lu-shan had said...

The prince is alive.

Prince Zuko. The exile. The heir claimed to have died a traitor's death, by his own sister's breath and word. *Alive*.

"Are you..." He didn't even recognize his own voice. "Are you *sure*?"

"Now you look like you've seen a ghost," Lu-shan muttered. "Huojin was sure. Though why anyone who got away from your princess would risk coming back... What are you going to do?"

Agni, what a question. If a *firebender* had broken loyalty and survived... "He didn't just work as an herb-healer with Healer Amaya, did he."

"No," Lu-shan said, puzzled. "Well, that too, of course, but - he's a bender. What did you think he was doing?"

"Field medicine," Yakume admitted, stunned. "General Iroh would have made certain he was trained in it... Agni. A *fire-healer*."

Lu-shan was watching him, very carefully. "Not just something we never heard of, I take it."

A hope. A legend. The heart your Avatar tried to tear from us.

My oaths or my people. Agni, what do I do?

"You know," Lu-shan said, almost casually, "you look like a man about to do something really stupid."

"Not before I've had some sleep," Yakume said firmly. *I can't decide. Not now. I can't.*

...I need to see the general. I need to know why he turned on the Fire Lord.

Well. He wasn't stupid enough to do that without sleep, either. "If I were you, Captain, I'd find a way to warn those under my command to keep those they care about away from the Inner Ring."

It took a minute for that to sink in; Lu-shan shook himself, like a lion-dog shedding water. "She

beat Long Feng. She took over the Dai Li. She took the city!"

"Yes, she did," Yakume agreed.

"He's a damn *healer*!"

"That's right; you don't train your medics to fight," Yakume mused. "Healer, yes. He's also a trained *imperial firebender*, Captain. Rumor might paint him as less than skilled, but I know the general. I served under him. The Dragon of the West would not settle for less than the best from any of his men. If all he's capable of are the basic forms, then he *knows* those forms. And a man who knows his basics and uses them can be more deadly than even a rising star of a bender. If he has fewer options, he doesn't have to *think*."

He didn't need to say more than that. Lu-shan was just as experienced in melee as any soldier, if on a less lethal battlefield. Thinking in a fight could get you killed.

Lu-shan's expression wavered between sympathy and distaste. "In the Earth Kingdom, we back a man because he's in the right. Not because we think he might win."

Yakume shook away that first rush of rage. After all, by his own customs, the man was right. "And what do you do in one of your own villages, when the mayor's two heirs contest his will?"

"We take it to court," Lu-shan shot back.

"An Agni Kai *is* a court," Yakume stated. "It's asking Agni to make clear who is stronger. Who is more favored by the spirits. Who is *right*."

"Agni..." Lu-shan blinked. "A what?"

"A fire duel," Yakume informed him. "If he challenges the princess, and she accepts, we have no right to interfere." Relief made the room gray out for a moment. *I need to find a bed. Soon.* "The consequences may be grave, but no one will doubt the victory."

Lu-shan eyed him. "So what if she refuses?"

Yakume stared at the captain as if he'd announced, in perfect seriousness, that the moon was made of green cheese. "Refuse? With this much at stake? When she hasn't even captured her foe by force of arms? That would be dishonorable!"

"He's an exile," Lu-shan pointed out.

"He was born a great name, and he will die a great name," Yakume said with dignity. "It's true, he's been banished; if he set foot on the home islands, the least peasant would have the right and duty to execute him. But he hasn't. He's here. And if a great name can't see a threat from one of her own kind coming, she doesn't deserve to win."

The headache's gone.

Azula held herself limp as if she were still wrapped in slumber, listening for any trace of potential assassins. Just because she felt better didn't mean she was better. Just because she felt safe...

Nowhere's safe.

Smooth sheets, with the same softness and scent she'd noted in their guise as Kyoshi Warriors. A scent of noodles and rich sauce, with a fainter trace of limon in the air, as if someone had squeezed

a glass just for her. Quiet, familiar breathing, as someone sat by the foot of her bed, where any fireblast would have to be telegraphed before it could land.

Ty Lee. Evidently wondering whether or not she'd be permitted to survive the morning.

Let her wonder a little longer.

Min was gone, of course. That was inevitable, given her last rage-clouded memory was of that *loathsome* waterbender touching her-

Min, and his link to the Earth resistance. Both of which Ty Lee had apparently traded away for the waterbender's... efforts.

Yesterday, I would have seared her for that.

Which, Azula coldly forced herself to admit, was the best argument of all in Ty Lee's favor. The little chi-blocker was dangerous to her foes precisely because she looked so fresh and innocent. Scars would have damaged her usefulness.

Beyond that, Ty Lee was useful because she feared Azula. *Feared* her; not, was paralyzed by utter terror. Emotional pain, mental pain - those could bind a servant stronger than steel chains. Physical pain might provoke a purely physical response. And given Ty Lee's heritage - once she started running, she might not stop.

You think you've hidden yourselves so well. Azula kept the amused smirk off her face. *As if Zuzu was the only one who ever studied your ancestors' history.*

Though she suspected Zuko might have read scrolls she'd never had a chance to steal for herself. Iroh had managed to inflict the *oddest* tomes on her brother in the years before his exile, and she'd lay odds the old busybody had only gotten worse afterward. Histories written *not* to favor the Fire Nation; what was *wrong* with the man?

What he taught Zuko doesn't matter.

And so what if a few families with Air Nomad blood had survived? The Avatar's generation was gone, and airbending with them. With the Avatar dead, they were no threat at all.

And if the next Water Tribe Avatar sought them out? All the better. Duty and honor chained Ty Lee's kin to the Fire Nation, and no child of Water would ever be able to move through their enemies' land without giving in to the urge for *revenge*.

And once the new Avatar had given himself away... with a united Fire Nation and the walls that'd been the Earth Kingdom's hope cast down, capture would be inevitable. A pity Zuko wouldn't be there to see it.

Stop thinking about Zuko!

But she couldn't, quite; and probing at that insistent thorn of a thought, together with the last not-quite-a-memory under Amaya's hands, told her why.

"Zuko loves you."

Words, she could have brushed aside. She'd heard her own mother lie, telling her little monster of a daughter she *loved* her too many times to count. Agni, she'd heard Father say it, and knew it was only another weapon in his arsenal. Look at everything Zuko had endured, just for the hope of the

Fire Lord's approval.

Which he'd never get anyway. Fool.

But Amaya hadn't given her words. She'd given *certainty*.

He wanted to protect you.

Solid as the steel hull of a battleship. Pure and clear as the spark before the lightning.

Oh, there was hate there, too. With all she'd inflicted on him with Father's permission, Zuko would have been a fool not to hate her. And he might have been an idiot, but he wasn't *that* stupid.

It was the hate that had convinced her, at the last. Ursa had spoken of love and lied. Fire Lord Ozai had spoken of it and sneered. But Zuko...

He hated me. And Father. And himself.

Why else do what he had, and destroy himself to stop her? No; the hate Amaya had shown her was real. But if that was real...

He loved you, and he wanted to protect you from the worst threat the Fire Nation has ever known.
You.

Protect her from herself? As if she would ever threaten the Fire Nation. That was impossi-

Wait.

Zuko was an idiot. So her father said, and so everyone believed. Yet Zuko had survived in Ba Sing Se, in hiding, for over a month. When the Dai Li had been actively watching him.

That was either intelligence, or luck. And Zuko had no luck.

This needed more thought. And not on an empty stomach. Decided, Azula sat up.

Ty Lee blinked at her, then dropped in submission-

"You're a fool," Azula said bluntly. "I'll consider whether or not you're too much of a fool to live."

"I'm... what?" the acrobat managed.

"It's true that the occupation needs me more than I need to crush any particular rebel," Azula stated. "But you trusted a Water Tribe woman to actually keep her word to someone *not in the tribe*." She glared at the chi-blocker. "Did you sleep through history when they covered the barbarians? Even Zuko knew better than to trust the Water Tribe! How do you think I was able to retreat so easily when he turned on me with the Avatar's little warriors? He knew he couldn't trust them beyond the moment they thought they had me. I'm surprised he and Uncle managed to survive that particular bit of treachery. Uncle must have driven the waterbender off before she could kill my brother."

"Kill him?" Ty Lee said faintly, daring to look up. "But Sokka's so cute. And nice. Why would his sister want to do that?"

"Brothers and sisters aren't always alike," Azula said dryly. "Sokka may be pleasant, in a blockheaded stubborn sort of way. You can keep him, if you catch him. But his sister tried to take my head off with a razor of water."

"...Oh."

"*Never* trust Water," Azula said emphatically. "They're loyal to their tribes, and *only* their tribes. If you're not Water, you're not *human*. Not to them."

"Okay," Ty Lee whispered. "I'll remember."

"See that you do." Azula straightened. "*Healer* Amaya. Indeed." Though the Water Tribe woman must have had some experience with acting in good faith, or she'd never have lasted in the city this long. Good faith the Dai Li had apparently trusted as well; she'd be having *words* with Agent Chan. "Remember, we're the invaders. One hasty move on her part, one deliberate slip healing - and then where would I be?"

Slowly, Ty Lee rose. "Her aura said she wouldn't," the chi-blocker protested. "She doesn't like you. She really doesn't. But she meant what she said. She... I think she *fostered* Zuko, Azula. Like - in my family. She didn't do what she wanted to do. She did what he would have wanted."

"And Zuko wanted me alive." Azula raised an eyebrow, testing that idea. It seemed to fit the skeleton of the theory she was building, outlandish as that speculation had to be.

"Of course he would have!" Ty Lee almost vibrated with sincerity. "You're the heir now. What happens to the Fire Nation if you die? Like Lu Ten died. It'd be horrible!"

Like Lu Ten. Agni, that fit so well. Zuko had idolized his cousin. He'd been crushed when Iroh's heir died, denying all the possibilities now open to them. Azulon was too dried-up and cranky to sire another son; Iroh, too faithful to Natsu's memory. The Fire Nation had to have another heir, or risk civil war-

Oh.

Spirits, that was Zuko *all over*, he *never* saw the world from the same angle as the rest of the court, and he'd never figured out how to explain to those who did...

Azula brushed off Ty Lee's attempts to help her bathe and dress, going through morning ablutions in a furious haze of thought. With liberal use of cold water splashed on her face, because obviously she needed to wake up to something she'd been missing for *years*.

Assume Zuko was not an idiot.

Stupid about family, certainly; just as Iroh had been. Which hadn't prevented General Iroh from being one of the most effective, intelligent commanders in Fire Nation history. He'd outwitted and out-fought the Earth Kingdom for decades, until he'd hit the wall - literally - at Ba Sing Se.

But if you ignored all the idiocy Zuko had pulled in the name of family - granted, there was a *lot* of it to ignore - he was of the same blood as she. Sozin's line. Not just master firebenders, but *tactical geniuses*.

He saw something I missed.

A civil war in the Fire Nation? Ridiculous. Who would dare?

You know who would.

Frost it all, she did. There were still domains that clung to legends of the time before Kyoshi's edict; still great names that bowed to her father only because they had no choice. Domains like

Byakko.

And Zuzu always was Mother's pet.

So. He could have known something the Fire Lord and Azula herself had not. If only hints, and not solid fact. And if he had, and if he hadn't been *quite* the idiot Father had always insisted he was-

That embarrassment in the war council took on an entirely different complexion.

No one would have taken Zuko seriously about an internal threat to the Fire Nation. Not when he didn't even have experience dealing with the obvious, external threat of the war. Zuko would have *known* that. And being Zuko - meaning, about as subtle as a fire-blast in dry grass - he would have tried to *get* some experience.

Oops.

"A good joke?" Ty Lee ventured, over the remains of breakfast.

"Not as a good as I first thought," Azula mused.

Well. At least she was warned now. Though why Zuko would have chosen that reason to act against her when she *was* the heir-

They don't think you can do it.

She wasn't blind, after all. She knew that Fire Lord Ozai had carefully measured out every drop of power he gave her. If the great names had the wits to see that as well, they might have drawn entirely the wrong conclusion.

Fools.

But perception had almost as much to do with power as reality. Just look at those idiots at the North Pole. They *perceived* that they'd defeated the Fire Nation, so they'd been willing to weaken their own defenses by sending waterbenders south; probably to aid the remnants of the Southern Water Tribe, given the navy's sightings of them.

They see the Avatar's victory as their victory, and his power as their power.

Come summer, she intended to make that a last, *fatal* mistake.

She savored that vengeance to come like the most delicate fruit tart. Almost enough to soothe the fury of her defeat.

Temporary defeat. They think they've won. And that overconfidence will kill them. "How much did we lose last night?" Azula said abruptly.

"I'm not sure," Ty Lee admitted.

Azula's eyes narrowed.

"That - that *spirit* came up through the floor, but you didn't see that, but..." Trembling, Ty Lee huddled on herself.

Terror, Azula saw in that pose. True, gut-wrenching fear. And not of her.

That won't do at all.

With an effort, she made her voice gentler, and touched a chilled hand. "Tell me."

"It - it *hurt*," Ty Lee managed. "Like it was all the sorrow in the world. You couldn't cheer it up, you couldn't talk to it..." She shivered. "I think I passed out."

An Earth Kingdom haunt. And earth opposes air, Azula calculated. Ty Lee wasn't lying. She might not even be stretching the truth.

"When I woke up - Agent Chan helped me put you to bed. And he said all the Dai Li who'd betray you were gone." Ty Lee smiled, still shaky. "And Kuei's library, too; but I guess we can live with that."

The Earth King's library? Azula blinked, bewildered. What could possibly be worth risking a life for in there? And - all the Dai Li who'd betray her? Damn it, she wanted hard numbers. "And what else?"

"Well... there were fires in the city," Ty Lee admitted. "Some people got killed."

Fires? Whoever was in charge of the rebels had nerve. She'd need to see to it that she enjoyed his execution.

"And," Ty Lee gulped, "I think some of the prisoners of war got away."

"Some?" Azula pointedly withdrew her hand.

"Maybe a lot?"

I'm trying to get hard numbers out of Ty Lee, Azula thought wryly. *Obviously, I'm not awake yet.* "And *Suzuran*?"

"They tied up early this morning," Ty Lee said, puzzled. "Why? They can't help Min get away. He already got away."

And earthbenders didn't run. Usually. But Min Wen was half Fire Nation, and Agni only knew what he'd try now. Especially with Mai prodding him along.

I gave you everything you wanted! Why betray me? Why?

Except she hadn't, had she? Mai had been a hawk trapped in a songbird's cage, bleeding from battered wings. She'd given Mai orders to fly, permission to use her deadly talents at her princess' command...

But some hawks would not fly to any falconer's fist. Some would have the skies, or perish.

You weren't supposed to know. You weren't supposed to ever realize there could be life free of me. How dare you fly from me!

A traitor would earn a traitor's death. She just had to arrange the pieces on the board properly. "Get me Agent Chan," Azula directed. "I want the full reports on what happened last night."

After all, Mai had heard her mention *Suzuran*. Which meant she might realize that any aid the ship could provide might well become Azula's trap.

As if a supply ship could do anything other than toss grain-sacks at a fire, Azula thought wryly. Granted, logistics were key to keeping the army fed and lethal. But right now? If she meant to survive, Mai needed soldiers, not soup.

Better yet, she needs a miracle, Azula thought darkly. I'll find you. All of you. And end you.

City first. Revenge for humiliation later.

Tapping crimson nails on the breakfast table, Azula waited for reports. And dreamed of blood and fire.

"I don't like this."

Hearing the *sir* Teruko carefully wasn't adding to that, Zuko winced. But he still followed her into the little walled garden, carefully shutting the pierced iron gate behind them. This wasn't a private garden, like Amaya's for herbs or a Middle Ring family's kitchen plot. This was a community garden, worked and protected by poor but proud tenants in the Lower Ring, and there should be people here. Picking greens, weeding the melon-cukes, or even stealing a quiet moment to rest in the greenery, away from war and invasion.

There should be, but there weren't. And with all this earth... an arranged meeting could also be an arranged ambush.

Teruko's glance was eloquent as words. *We're being watched.*

He knew. He could feel it. And here was the ultimate test.

Do I trust my people? Do I believe they managed to get past Azula? Do I believe we managed to?

A little bad luck. One moment of thoughtlessness. That was all it would take, for everything to fall apart. And the world's spirits hated his people.

So much hate. So much pain. How can any of us trust each other?

Bracing himself, Zuko took off his helmet.

"I knew you were crazy." Huojin stepped out from behind the suspect greenberry bush. "I didn't know you were this crazy."

For a moment, Zuko could only stare. *He's here. He's real. I made it this far, we're all still alive-*

"Ack! Lee! Armor! Ow!"

One last, fierce hug - checking for weapons or concealed blasting jelly, you could never be too careful - and Zuko stepped back, blinking furiously. *Not going to cry. Stupid to cry out here, where anyone could sneak in. Stupid to cry, everything's all right...* "You're alive," he rasped out. "That's - I-" Words slipped through his fingers like flames.

Oh, no. Oh no, not here, not now... have to hang on...

Because Huojin was giving him a worried look that suddenly edged over into alarm, and Huojin didn't *know* Teruko-

No threat. Safe. Us, here, now. Safe, glad to see you, worried...

He'd trapped Huojin's hand between his own. When had he done that? And why?

Huojin gave him the oddest look as Zuko let go, and glanced at Teruko. "So... you're a friend?"

"And we'd better get out of sight," Teruko said practically. "I'll explain. Underground."

"This had better be good," Huojin muttered, shaking out his hand as if it tingled.

No kidding. Dazed, Zuko followed the Guard down into the hole behind the bush. And brightened, even as earth closed overhead. "Suyin. Jia." And it was good to see them, even if they were staring at his armor, but... He glared at Huojin.

"The other earthbenders are busy," Huojin said defensively. "We've got all those Army guys to get settled, Quan's Dai Li are watching over the Earth King, and Tingzhe's in charge of keeping the evacuation moving, poor guy. And we needed somebody who wasn't just going to squash red armor on sight."

"And I came to help," Suyin stated, voice shaking a little as she glanced past him to Teruko's expressionless faceplate. "Jia doesn't like to fight, and - I don't like it either, but I *can*..." She glanced at her silent sister.

Jia had her hands lowered, studying Teruko with a look of stunned amazement. "You're a woman."

Oh no-

But Teruko was smiling as she took off her helmet. "Yes, ma'am. Lieutenant Teruko. I know Guard Huojin from the prince's description; you'd be Jia and Suyin Wen? Daughters of Meixiang, and Professor Tingzhe Wen?"

Both girls blinked at her. Swiveled their gazes, and gave him a *look*.

"Your families are already in the middle of everything," Zuko said defensively, uncertain how to read that expression. "Of course I told our marines who you are. In case... well. In case."

Huojin's brows shot up at that. But he kept quiet, as Jia shook her head. "It's just hard to believe," she said, uncertain. "You're fighting *soldiers*. If something goes wrong... Dad's got histories. Some of them, about prisoners - things can *happen*."

"That'd be why I'm a marine, not army," Teruko said practically. "Things going wrong usually mean the whole ship's sinking. We usually don't go into the army, to be honest. Home Guard; lots of us join up there. Special units like the Yu Yan, who aren't supposed to be right in the thick of the brawl. And there's always a few like me, who take on the marines. Just because we all learn to fight doesn't mean we're as thickheaded about risking our necks as the guys."

"Hey!" Zuko and Huojin sputtered.

"Private Fushi and I talked about this, sir," Teruko shrugged. "Any way you slice it, we're going to have a lot of girls realizing for the first time they might have to *fight*, and scared to death that means fighting the way they're heard about. And what do they know? Spirit-tales. Plays. And now a real invasion. They're probably all having nightmares about battles where everybody dies in a blaze of glory; you know what plays are like."

Zuko cringed. Oh boy, did he *ever*.

"And scared kids don't learn," Teruko went on. "So we need to tell them the truth any time we get a chance. Yes, the Fire Nation fights. Yes, it's scary. But there's no way any of us is going to shove them in the front lines and expect them to kill people. No clan does that. It's not just stupid, it's *suicidal*."

"But Zuko-" Suyin looked at him, and shut her mouth.

"That," Teruko said in tones that could have cut glass, "is just one of the things *Suzuran* would like to *discuss* with the Fire Lord." She caught Zuko's disbelieving look, and had the grace to look abashed. "Not that we'd make it past Azulon's Gates, but... Frost it, sir, we saw what happened at the North Pole. You weren't even old enough to recruit, and he sent you after that? We know your line's got guts. But for the Fire Lord's clan to be that careless of heirs' lives? It's an insult to the whole nation!"

"...Huh?" Zuko managed, utterly confused.

Teruko sighed. "Just think about it, sir. Later." She took a seabag off her shoulder. "Are you still sure about this?"

"Yes," Zuko nodded, already working on his armor ties. "The Earth King knows what we are. I don't want to rub who I am in his face." *Unless I have to.* "He doesn't wear armor. That's what Guards are for. And this is just a plain private's armor, and all the high officers he's ever dealt with are decked out like painted screens." He lifted the cuirass over his head, letting Teruko store it in the bag. "I don't like it either. But if I need it before we get out of there, everything's gone to Koh in a hand-basket anyway."

"Your call, sir," Teruko sighed.

Shedding armor, Zuko felt eyes on him. Suyin's and Jia's he'd expected. But Huojin's? "What?"

"I knew you had military training, but..." Huojin shook his head. "How long have you been wearing that stuff?"

Taking off a shin-guard, Zuko paused. Made himself keep moving. "Uncle had me in my first full set at eleven." *He said I needed it.*

"Most great names wait until an heir's twelve," Teruko said levelly, nesting armor together. "But given the circumstances of Lady Ursa's disappearance - specifically that no one seems to *know* those circumstances, officially - I understand the general's caution."

Treason, Zuko thought bleakly. *And Fath- Fire Lord Ozai must have known. All along.* Which, in a dark, awful way, made some of what the Fire Lord had done make sense. Prince Zuko took after his mother. Everyone whispered that. And if *Ursa* had committed treason...

And oh, look. Here I am, a traitor. A bitter smirk touched his face. *It's almost funny.*

Deep breath. Set it aside. They had to keep moving.

"I knew the Fire Nation was different," Huojin mused, as Zuko clasped a dark cloak over his gray under-tunic. "I just didn't know... I want my kids to grow up *safe*."

"I can't give you safe," Zuko said bluntly. "I wish I could. But there's a war out there. No one's safe." He sighed. "They're not great names, Huojin. No one's going to send assassins after them. It wouldn't be right." He picked up the seabag with a hidden groan; it was *always* easier to just wear armor than carry it. Damn politics. "Which way do we go?"

Eyebrows raised, Huojin led them onward, Jia blocking the way behind them with strategic falls of dirt and stone. Each of which set Zuko's teeth on edge.

Trust your people. Trust your skills. There's water in that earth. Not much, but you could use it to

dig out if you had to. Teruko's holding it together. You're her leader. Lead.

"So..." Huojin glanced back at them. "You said something about an explanation, Lieutenant?"

"The prince takes after his grandfather," Teruko said simply. "Shidan has a way of getting people to know where they stand."

And where does he stand? Zuko wanted to ask. But not here. Not now. "How's the plan going?"

"Supplies are up in the warehouse already, set to move to a train when we grab it," Huojin told him. "The Earth King's ordered that to go ahead no matter what else gets decided. He wants that scroll cache out of the city. And I hear he thinks we're the best chance for getting earth-healing spread to the rest of the kingdom before some spirit can wipe it out again."

Zuko almost tripped over a crack in the tunnel, and heard Teruko swear under her breath. "*Earth-healing?*" the marine said in disbelief.

Jia smiled, a sweet echo of Suyin's wry grin. "We found it in the Dai Li's scrolls," she nodded. "It's hard, but... Oma and Shu, think what we can do now!"

Earth-healing. We'll have more healers! Which should be good news. But Zuko cast a glance at Suyin, whose grin had faded into worry. "What's wrong?"

"Wan Shi Tong's a knowledge spirit, but Dad and Amaya think he's the one who made the Dai Li keep forgetting those scrolls," Suyin said seriously. "And he's stealing other things. He tried to steal a letter Shirong says is important to the Avatar, and the war. The Earth King had to banish him from the kingdom!"

Teruko made a choked noise, and Zuko wished he could abandon pride long enough to join her. Granted, he'd heard the Earth King was the spiritual heart of the kingdom. But he'd never heard of any lone Fire Sage who could enforce his will on a spirit with *that* much power.

Should have kept the armor on.

Silly thought. Ordinary metal wasn't going to defend him against spirits. Or one who had the power to balk them.

Not without help. Zuko took a breath. *You've faced the Avatar. You can face a shaman.*

"I just don't get it," Suyin went on, worried. "Why would a knowledge spirit want to stop people from knowing things?"

"Wan Shi Tong? Power," Zuko said flatly. "He's all about power. *He Who Knows Ten Thousand Things*. That's his name. That's what he is. The more people know, the less power he has over them." And... why was everyone giving him odd looks?

Everyone but Teruko. Who'd started, and now smiled, as if running into an old friend.

"You know about this spirit?" Huojin frowned. "I don't think I'd ever heard of him before - well, before that mess with Tingzhe and the fox."

"A fox took *Tingzhe's* form?" Zuko bit back his own snarl. "Over-powered feather-duster... People hear *knowledge spirit*, they think sharing. Because that's what people do. What you don't know can really hurt you. And he *knows* that. He doesn't share, he hoards. *He* never steals it, oh no; he lets his foxes take the fall for that. But if you have a book on Koh, or anything on why only the Water

Tribes never pay tithes to the Air Temples..." He shook his head, recalling a fox in Ran's shape, and exactly how fiercely he'd made his point that not so much as a fox's whisker would *ever* come near one of his clan again.

...Which didn't make any *sense*, because he knew he'd never seared the tail off a fox in his life.

And I don't know any Ran!

Amaya. He had to talk to Amaya. He'd been hit by lightning, even if he had redirected it. What if he'd missed something?

What if I didn't?

After all, yāorén were supposed to help the Avatar. And he couldn't think of anything more likely to make most people run back to "the world's a *friendly* place, really" Aang than feeling like something was dangerously unmoored in their heads.

Damn you, Yangchen. I know this is your fault. And it's not. Going. To work.

Water. Fire. Spirit. And now earth. Something ought to be able to fix what was wrong with him. Without going anywhere *near* Aang.

The Avatar's got the whole world pulling for him. My people need me.

Like Teruko says: Not. Expendable. Not anymore.

"Tithes?" Huojin was still frowning as they walked.

At least he could fall back on his studies for that. Thank Agni. "What, you think people can live on top of a mountain and be vegetarians?" Zuko said sourly. "I've climbed up there, Huojin. There's not a race of grain on the Eastern Continent that'll grow that high. Not much does, besides orchards. You can't live on just fruits and nuts. And they didn't. They had *arrangements* for everything else."

"Mostly, we watch for bad weather, you feed us," Teruko spoke up. "That's what they say in school, anyway. I don't know if it was the same over here in the east, but in the Fire Nation... if you don't know the story, you'll hear it soon enough. You want to get people worked up against airbenders even today? Say *Joetsu*. And *heir to Kyoshi*. Sozin did. And the rest is... history."

"Really didn't help that the Western elders showed up looking for their tithe a week after that hurricane hit," Zuko said darkly. "Saying they needed extra, they were having a lot of kids that year."

Huojin almost said something; looked at the two girls with them, and bit it back to, "Damn."

You can say that again, Zuko thought, worried. There was no way he should know that about the kids.

But I do.

He knew what had happened. And the worst of it was knowing that it didn't *have* to happen. Eastern grains wouldn't cut it, no; but Byakko had worked out millennia ago how to grow crops almost up into a snowcap. *No hou e nohara*. Plant a dozen different vines, herbs, blood-amaranth, teosinte-buckwheat, potato-chokes, and trees all together, varying the varieties by altitude. Separately they'd die; working together, they warmed and protected each other in alpine terraces.

With enough determination and work, everything thrived.

Volcanic soil doesn't hurt, either.

But the temples hadn't done it. They *wouldn't* do it. The mountain fields needed care, attention, and a clan working together, year after year. They needed *attachment*.

And Air Nomads can't get attached. To anything.

"Tithes," Huojin muttered. "Not what you think about when anybody talks about peaceful nomads."

"I don't know if they went to the temples, but there *were* tithes," Suyin said, troubled. "Dad says that's another part of how Chin got so far conquering the kingdom. He organized the tithe. So villages that'd had a bad year got help paying it."

"Still doesn't make sense," Huojin objected. "The Air Nomads were peaceful, right? Understanding types? They didn't fight. What did people think they'd do if someone just said no?"

"If you know Kyoshi's story," Teruko stated, "you already know what we thought they could do."

Silence. Only the scrape of shoes on stone, as they kept walking.

Zuko looked at too-quiet girls, and Huojin, and Teruko's stubborn face. And sighed. "Look. Whatever happened then, it's over now. Maybe between your father, and the Earth King's library, and Uncle - you wouldn't believe the scrolls Uncle can find - maybe we can figure out what really happened. Who we should all be angry at. If there is anybody. Someone hurt Kyoshi, Kyoshi hurt us, Fire Lord Sozin-" He had to swallow, hard. "My great-grandfather started a war that hurt everybody. Maybe it's his fault. Probably a lot of it's his fault. But he's dead, and we're not. And I'm going to try to keep us that way. And so's the lieutenant. I know she's scary-"

"Sir!"

"You're a *marine*," Zuko said practically, giving her a jaundiced look. "You want to tell me you're not scary? You don't eat fire and brimstone for breakfast, with a few Earth Kingdom soldiers for dessert?"

"Rather have melon-cukes, sir," Teruko said staunchly. "Save the soldiers for trawling for leopard-sharks." One hand near her mouth, she gave the girls a deliberate stage-whisper. "Though that's not really working too well anymore. The last leopard-shark damn near choked on one of those guys' beards, and I think he told his friends."

Dead silence.

"Um." Zuko looked at two faintly green girls, and one Guard blinking as if he'd finally seen a piece of idiocy that outdid everything else on the streets. "Not funny?"

"You know," Huojin sighed, "so much about you is *painfully* clear now..."

"I'm... sorry?" The betraying heat of embarrassment burned in his face, and Zuko briefly entertained thoughts of stomping Huojin's glow-lamp into welcome darkness.

"I'm not," Teruko muttered grumpily. "It was just a frosted joke."

"And I've heard worse out of Guards, and soldiers off the Wall," Huojin said soberly, patting Suyin

on the shoulder. "Just not around kids."

Zuko winced. "...Oh."

"Kids?" Teruko glanced at her commander. "You said the little one was thirteen."

"I am!" Suyin fired back. "But we don't - nobody *fights* here, I-"

Jin caught her shoulder. "We didn't grow up with a war," the older girl said. Voice steady, even if she was still pale. "It was something you read about in books, or spirit-tales. And now it's here and it's real and it's so awful..." She took a ragged breath. "It's - it's just hard, Lieutenant. We're scared. All the time. I don't know how you can joke about it."

Now Teruko was red. "My fault," she said stiffly. "I didn't realize you'd be unblooded."

"Mine," Zuko corrected. "I'm the one who lived here." His heart sank. "This is going to be a lot harder than I thought."

Huojin gave him a searching look. Then, ruefully, smiled. "You'll make it work. If we can learn to trust some Dai Li enough to get Min back, we can handle a few firebenders. No matter how far they've got their boots stuck in their mouths."

Teruko snorted.

"So you did get him out," Zuko sighed, relieved. "The report Shirong sent was a little sketchy on that part..."

And the girls were definitely *not* looking at him.

Oh no. "What did you do?" Zuko asked warily.

"Stayed home with Jinhai," Suyin grumbled. "Somebody had to."

"Oh good- wait." Because if the girl he'd been training to fight had stayed home... Zuko glared at Jia. "What did *you* do?"

"N-nothing," the earthbender said uncertainly. "Much."

"I know that tone," Zuko mused, half to himself. "I've used that tone. On Uncle. He never looked very happy about it." *Oh, Agni.* "So. How badly did you risk your neck, and how many knives is your mother heating up to deal with me?"

"Um..."

"I'm dead," Zuko muttered.

"She's still alive, sir," Teruko observed. "Her mother should just make you *wish* you were dead."

"I think Meixiang thinks you'll have enough to worry about," Huojin grinned. "Jia trapped Azula in the throne room floor. I hear she wasn't too happy about it."

"You *what*?" Zuko yelped.

"It's a long story?" Jia tried.

"*Start talking.*"

"Okay..."

Agni, Zuko thought some time later; not sure if it was a prayer or a curse. *Oh, Agni.*

It didn't help that Teruko was coughing. To cover her giggles.

"Something stuck in your throat, Lieutenant?" Huojin asked wryly.

"Just remembering an old marine curse," Teruko snickered. "May you have a dozen subordinates *just like you.*"

"It isn't funny!" Jia gulped, almost in tears. Suyin linked hands with her, glaring daggers at them all. "There were *spirits* and we had to sneak into the palace and I had to pretend I was bringing a morning-after poem and I thought I was going to *die*..."

Zuko let out a breath, trying to push the terror and belated battle-rush aside. "Good work."

"I... what?"

"You stuck to the plan. You did your job. You didn't die," Zuko said bluntly. "You went up against my sister and walked away in one piece. That's amazing." He shivered, wishing he could breathe air that didn't taste like rock. "Do me a favor? Try not to do that *ever* again?"

"Not without some more training," Teruko put in. "It's not good to scare your lord if you can get around it. When dragon-children get jumpy, things get fried."

"Teruko," Zuko groaned, "I'm not-"

Damn. That was light ahead. Not theirs. "Are we supposed to be near the guards?"

"I think so. Darn tunnels all look alike..." Huojin glanced at Jia, who nodded. "I'll go clear the way."

Oh great. Earth Kingdom guards. This is going to be so much fun.

It wasn't.

Do not feed them their spears.

Granted, they were Earth Kingdom, and he and Teruko were obviously not. And granted, the half-dozen armed soldiers were tired, upset, and guarding people Zuko very much wanted safe. But Huojin and the girls were here to vouch for them both, and they were all running out of time.

And admit it, Zuko told himself. *What really ticks you off is that they think six of them is enough to stop us.*

Which, as Uncle kept trying to pound through his thick head, was just pride, pure and simple. And as silly as their spear-tipped posturing as they questioned Huojin. Sillier; he knew how much every minute counted, and how little they could afford to waste any of them.

Though even knowing how silly it was, he wanted to bristle. Did they think he *wanted* to be down here, in this cold cave-damp air that didn't taste anything like honest sun-touched breezes-

Wait a minute.

Zuko lifted an open hand, trying not to react to the sudden bristle of steel his way. Drew his fingers

together, and *down*.

Wisping out of damp air, drops of water swirled together over his hand.

"I'm Lee," Zuko said levelly, meeting the wide-eyed gaze of the grizzled soldier in charge.

"Amaya's waterbending apprentice." He clenched his fingers, droplets freezing into a blade of ice.

"How much more proof do you need?"

"But she's-"

"A firebender," Zuko cut the sergeant off; from the way Teruko's eyes had narrowed, any whisper of the word *woman* would end in blood drawn. "She's here to help. At the Earth King's request."

"Help," the sergeant's younger partner scoffed. "Firebenders don't belong inside the Walls!"

"Or anybody who might *whelp* firebenders," a vicious whisper came from the back.

Jia paled, and Suyin glared.

Agni, it's good they've kept Jinhai undercover. "Don't worry," Zuko said grimly. "We're leaving as soon as we can shake the dust off."

Oh, look at that, he thought as the guards stiffened. *Uncle's Earth Kingdom books were right; that is an insult.*

Because there was wasting time, and then there was defending your people's honor. Which was *never* a waste of time.

"As he said, they're here on his majesty's business," Huojin stepped into the breach. "The sooner they take care of that, the sooner they'll be gone." He eyed one particular guard in the back. "And by the way, Fu? You're a jerk. And I'm glad I'm leaving. I never, *ever* want my daughters to meet any of *your* family."

"Spirits, man," the sergeant choked. "Luli's Fire Nation?"

"No, Sergeant Sung," Huojin bit out. "*I* am."

The guards recoiled. Zuko tried not to care. At least the spears were all out of their way...

But he could see the hurt the girls were trying to hide, as they walked out of the last tunnel into an echoing, shelter-stuffed cavern that smelled of damp stone and cooking food and people. "I wish I could change things," Zuko said quietly. "I wish the world wasn't this messed up. But... here we are."

"We'll be okay," Suyin said fiercely. "We *will*. We got Min back. Those guys - they don't matter."

"Yes, they do," Jia said, unhappy. "I hate it, but they do. That's why we have to go." She gave Zuko her own fierce look, that reminded him of a certain water-netted cat. "You'd better be as good as Dad thinks you are. I don't care if I never get to dress up for a party again. I'm not letting Jinhai grow up *here*." She looked at the ripple in the crowd as a small body darted around adults. "Even if he *is* a brat."

"Lee!"

Jinhai thumped into him like a mini-fireball, words a confused mix of *where were you, where are we going*, and *we got Min back, everybody was so scared-*

So much for a dignified entrance, Zuko thought ruefully, letting the young boy cling and hold and make sure he was really *real*.

Teruko peered around him to eye Jinhai carefully. "I take it this is Jinhai, sir?"

"Another of my students," Zuko said simply, resting a hand on brown hair. "Professor Wen's youngest."

"Your - oh." Teruko's face gentled, just a little. She stifled a laugh. "The captain's never going to know what hit him."

Jinhai lifted his head away from Zuko's robe, and green eyes widened. "Who are you?"

"She's Lieutenant Teruko," Jia told him, smiling as Suyin scanned the cavern for the rest of their family. "She's got an awful sense of humor. But she's trying."

Teruko grinned wryly.

"She's a marine from the supply ship *Suzuran*," Zuko stated, addressing the growing crowd as much as Jinhai. "She's here to help."

"What's a marine?" Jinhai wondered.

"Shipboard and littoral battle specialist," Teruko said crisply. "If someone tries to attack the captain's ship, we stop them."

"But... you're a *girl*," Jinhai protested.

Oh no. Zuko winced.

"I thought you knew better than to think that about your sisters, young man," Tingzhe said dryly, striding through the crowd. "*You're a girl* is precisely the mistake Princess Azula made, that let Jia strike to win us all free."

Handing over Jinhai to his father's welcoming arms, Zuko felt the blood drain from his face all over again. "Are you *sure* you're all okay?" he managed.

"Yes," Tingzhe said gravely. "Even the princess. The Earth King's decision, after due consideration on what the Fire Lord would likely do if she died here. Though that does leave us with the unavoidable problem of her *here*, and angry. I don't suppose you have ideas how we might handle that?"

She's alive. Zuko tried not to sigh in relief. Uneasy relief. Yes, she was cruel. Yes, sometimes he just hated her. Yes, her life might save Ba Sing Se in the short run, but what it could do to the Fire Nation in the long term...

But she was his *sister*. He didn't want her to die. No matter how... convenient it might have been.

Up against Azula. Not good.

Yet... it wasn't necessarily *bad*, either. Azula targeted her malice. If they planned things right, they could make certain that malice found a focus that was *not* Ba Sing Se.

Meaning us. Then we just have to survive it.

Details, details.

"I have some plans," Zuko stated. "Where can I find-"

The crowd parted like wind-blown grain, and Earth King Kuei regarded him.

He's got guards, Zuko saw, relieved. *Good*. And there were Bon, Shirong, and Quan; thank the spirits. If anyone could give Kuei the dose of reality he needed, they could. If anyone could keep him safe-

None of us are safe. They'll keep him a moving target.

"I would guess," Kuei said plainly, eyeing the mass of those kneeling and not, and clearly noting Zuko and Teruko hadn't even twitched away from standing, "your name *isn't* really Lee."

"Earth King Kuei." Zuko inclined his head, one great name to another. Huojin and the others had faded back with Tingzhe; good. "I am Zuko, son of Ursa, and Fire Lord Ozai."

Kuei blanched. Bon and Quan looked like they wanted to be anywhere else. And Shirong, damn him, had a crinkle around his eyes like someone who wanted to break down giggling.

A sound like a gust of wind seemed to fill the cavern. Zuko kept his fingers from curling with an effort, ready to fight or flee-

Like a great wave, those refugees not already bowing kneeled.

I... what?

Kuei blinked. Glanced over the crowds, and turned a stunned look on Zuko. "You? You're the Fire Lord's...?"

Wait for it, Zuko told himself sardonically. *Any minute now. Monster, traitor, spirit-cursed - which one are you going to pick?*

"...Do you have *any* idea what your sister is *doing* up there?"

"She tried to fry me with lightning," Zuko said wryly. *What's going on? They know I'm an exile, I know they do. They can't mean... Just keep going.* "I think I can guess."

"*Your* sister," Kuei emphasized. "She is *your* responsibility. A family, a village, a city deals with its own problems. The actions she takes, the debts she incurs, are yours to bear."

"Maybe in the Earth Kingdom." Zuko's glare didn't yield. "In the Fire Nation, your actions reflect on those you honor, who you have loyalty to. She carries out the Fire Lord's will, for she is loyal to our father. I am *not*." He drew a breath. "Not anymore."

Another carrying whisper; surprise, this time. Yet still, no anger.

Why?

He couldn't ask. He couldn't risk losing momentum, as Kuei hesitated and those of both nations began to stand.

Kuei looked him over again. "You might notice that you're standing in the Earth Kingdom."

"I am standing on Earth Kingdom land," Zuko said, just as blunt. "But the Fire *Nation*, is the people." *Deadlock, your majesty. We're going to start this on equal terms if I have to drag you there kicking and screaming.*

Quiet. Green eyes met gold, gazes pushing...

I can take him. I'm stronger, more experienced-

I'm... out of my mind. I don't want this city, damn it!

It was hard to push back the fire. To hold at bay the water that said these people were *his* tribe, and anything that threatened them had to *die*.

Kuei is not a threat. Breathe.

"Your majesty," Zuko nodded slightly. "You want the Fire Nation out of your city, and Azula gone. But more than that, you want to help Avatar Aang restore balance to the world."

"Avatar Aang," Kuei said bleakly, "is dead."

"No," Zuko said simply. "He's not."

"What?"

"Katara of the Southern Water Tribe was carrying a gift of the spirits," Zuko stated. "She brought him back. He was gravely injured, Healer Amaya can tell you how bad lightning is, but he's alive." He looked over the crowd, taking in fear, wonder, hope. "Katara and I are healers. Right now, the Avatar's weak enough that I wouldn't put him up against a wet pygmy puma. But he will recover. He just needs time. We have to buy him that time." He fixed Kuei with his gaze again. "Aang's in no shape to save anybody right now. We have to do it ourselves. And *we can*."

Kuei blinked. But some of the tension eased out of his shoulders. "We?"

"This will only work if we do it together," Zuko said soberly. Damn it, he'd written a speech for this, agonized over it... and now it all seemed to fly out of his head.

Keep going. You can cross lava, if you just keep going.

"The heart of this war isn't the Fire Nation," Zuko began. "Not the war, not the army - not even the occupation. They're the symptoms, not the disease. You can try to bring down the fever all you want, but if you don't clean out the infection, it won't *stop*."

Kuei's brows went up. "And just what do you think is the disease, Prince Zuko?"

He's not sure about me. Why should he be? I'm not sure about me. I can say what I want about trying to fix the world, I can mean it - but I want my people to live. "The world's out of balance. We have to fix it."

"And how would this - proposed place of resistance you mean to build do that?" Kuei's face was stern. "Balance came from the four nations; the four elements. And the Air Nomads are gone." His eyes narrowed. "Your great-grandfather saw to that."

An uneasy murmur from the onlookers; Zuko hid a vindictive smile. *You really haven't had to deal with court politics, have you, Kuei?*

No, down. Bad prince. Do not hand him his head. Won't help your people.

...Though, as Toph would say, a little bit of slicey wouldn't hurt. "You're right," Zuko agreed. And saw Shirong flinch, ever so slightly.

Hey, he asked for it.

"Fire Lord Sozin created a horror, and none of us will ever be free of it," Zuko went on. "The Air Nomads are dead. That crime is on our heads. Even though no one here committed those crimes, even though no one here would ever *want* to, even though *every bender who began the war* is dead and ashes - the spirits still pour their blood on our hands. You think I don't know that? You think I haven't spent my *life* enduring the spirits' hate, just for who I was born? You think I didn't *risk* my life, risk challenging Avatar Kyoshi's own decree, just to break free of the Fire Lord's power? As *everyone* here has? Yes. We *know*. The Air Nomads are *dead*. And the world calls *us* guilty." He took a breath, gripping tight on a temper that threatened to slip free and *burn*. "The Nomads are dead. But *airbending* doesn't have to be."

Kuei didn't - quite - flinch. But he looked less certain. "How?"

He's willing to listen. Don't blow it. "The Northern Air Temple is inhabited."

Kuei started, and a wave of fierce whispers began.

"They're Earth Kingdom villagers," Zuko went on, hiding his surprise that Shirong hadn't mentioned it. *Then again, he's got an idea how dangerous it is for them to be there.* "Or, they *were*. Now they use gliders. They live with the sky." He shook his head. "They're not airbenders, not yet. But they *could* be."

"*Could be* is a thin wall to hold against the world," Kuei said quietly.

"That's why I have a backup plan," Zuko replied. "Adaptability. Perseverance. Will. Water, earth, and fire. Ba Sing Se has supported every element here. Except air. Because air is *freedom*." *Breathe.* "If we build a place for that, where any tribe and nation can live together... we'll find airbenders. And with your help, we'll have the scrolls to teach them." He held Kuei's gaze. "Avatar Yangchen thinks it could work."

"Avatar Yangchen?" Quan blurted in disbelief.

"You probably never got to see it," Zuko grimaced. "And I hope you never have to. When the Avatar's hurt... sometimes, one of the *other* Avatars can take over." He glanced at some of his own people in the crowd. "Yes, I told Avatar Roku what I thought of him. If he wanted me fried, it was already too late to run." He snickered. "I don't think he likes me much."

Toothy grins spread in half the crowd. Zuko stifled a laugh in a cough. Spirits, Kuei's *face*...

"Do you often go around angering great spirits?" the Earth King said, with an air of morbid curiosity.

"I have it on good authority that I give spirits a headache," Zuko said wryly. Sobered. "Your majesty, I have no choice. Avatar Kyoshi's decree bound the Fire Nation to serve the Fire Lord. To stop the war, to stop any of it - *we must disobey the Avatar.*"

Kuei frowned. "Avatar Kyoshi's decree?"

"Yes, your majesty," Shirong spoke up. "The whole story is long, and ugly; I've had Madam Wen write it down so we can print it. In short... a little over three centuries ago, the Fire Nation was more like Kyoshi Island is today. Each island might have its own ruler, and there was no central government. When they went to war, they fought each other. Not us."

"We have to fight," Zuko said, at Kuei's incredulous look. "It's our nature. We are children of fire;

we need it. Just as you need laws, and deals, and fortresses of stone. But Kyoshi..." He drew a sharp breath, forcing himself not to call fire. "Kyoshi thought she had the right to change all that." *Breathe. Don't kill anyone.* "And she killed half our people doing it."

Kuei paled. "You accuse *Avatar Kyoshi*-"

"Of the truth!" Now his fists did clench, fire blazing before he could snuff it. "She came, she killed, she *chained* us to the Fire Lord, and we've gone mad trying to escape. Look around you, Kuei! These are the people who ran. Who *survived*." Zuko opened his hands, heart aching. "These are my people as they should be."

Outside of the whole, "we all have to hide who we are" part. Let's not get into that.

"You need Azula out of the city," Zuko went on. "More than that, you need the Fire Army distracted, so the remaining Earth Kingdom forces stand a chance of regrouping." He looked Kuei straight in the eye. "Help us with this plan, and they'll definitely be distracted."

"Your sister hates you that much?" There was sorrow in Kuei's eyes. But not, thank the spirits, disbelief.

"Yes," Zuko admitted. "Yes, she does. But what she feels about me won't matter. Your majesty, I *know* who designed that drill. I know what else he's been helping the Fire Nation build, and why. And I know why he *stopped*." He looked over the crowd. "Believe it or not, that engineer is a good man. The Avatar helped him free himself. But he won't *stay* free. Not if the Fire Nation makes a determined assault." Another sweep of listening faces, and Zuko nodded. "Not unless we help him."

"You know," Kuei said into that listening silence, "Agent Shirong gave me the impression you were planning an evacuation. An *escape*."

Zuko smiled, and saw grown men flinch. "Earth and Fire have more in common than you think. Including a *fighting retreat*."

That seemed to strike home; Kuei rocked back on his heels, and gave him the slightest nod.

He believes me. Oh Agni, please let this work.

"If you're looking for safety, I can't give it to you," Zuko addressed the crowd. "All I can offer is another kind of danger. My people will try to keep you safe. Our object is to distract, build, and defend. But we *will* have to fight. Here, on the way, when we're building - any of these. Maybe all of them. You know what you risked to get here. Only you can decide what you're willing to risk now. I will *not* demand your loyalty." He softened his voice. "I'm not the one who should have the first claim."

Startled looks, and a murmur of dismay.

Zuko nodded toward Kuei. "The Earth King tends to the spirits of this city, just as our great names do. And no matter what else they've done, what Long Feng *ordered* them *by their loyalty* to do - the Dai Li hunt evil spirits, and track down malice. *Just* as our Fire Sages do." He straightened. "To wish this city as your home, this king as your lord, is *not* dishonorable."

...He really, really needs some court lessons, Zuko thought, watching Kuei gape. He looks like I slapped him with an octopus.

He kept a straight face; if *he* ignored Kuei's slip, everyone else would, too. Give them long enough,

they'd convince themselves it'd never happened at all. "We need to do this together. I need people of every nation if this plan is going to work. And so do you. The Avatar has taught that the nations have to be separate? That's what let the Fire Lord get this far! The Air Nomads, the Southern Water Tribe, the western Earth cities... one after another they fall, and the rest of the world *watches*. Because it's not their problem. It's not *their* people." He swept a hand across. "How many of us here are alive because Amaya left the North Pole? Because she came to *help*?" He fixed Kuei with a glare that couldn't help but be angry. "How many Earth Kingdom soldiers would *be* alive, if the Northern Water Tribe had allied with you?"

Breathe. Hang on. Just a little longer.

"We think we're separate nations, but separation is an *illusion*," Zuko stated. "Strip away the elements, strip away the traditions - we're all *people*. People who can choose to stand aside and watch... or decide what's happening in the world is *evil*. And fight for our lives." He let out a slow breath. "I want us to fight together."

Kuei took off his glasses, polishing them on his sleeve. Put them back on, and shook his head. "You're not quite sane, are you?"

Sane people don't have their families trying to kill them. "Sane people don't spend years chasing an Avatar a century gone," Zuko said plainly. "But I was right, Kuei. He was out there. I found him." There's got to be something more I can say. Something better.

But his mind was blank. Wonderful. He could feel the silence stretching, and if it went on too long, everything he'd argued for could still go down in flames...

"With all due respect, your majesty," Teruko said into the silence, "*all* the great names are crazy." She nodded at Zuko. "They hold our loyalty. They protect us from spirits, as much as they can. They stand for us against other great names. And they have to be noble, upright, and honorable beyond reproach, when they know - they *know* - the quickest, most ruthless way to shatter a domain's resistance, is to shatter its lord." She paused, gold eyes searching Kuei's. "I learned to fight because I always wanted to be a marine. But we all learn to. Because if someone decides to tip over into Low War, the lord's children are *targets*."

Kuei blanched. "That's horrible."

"We're not nice people." Zuko tamped down a rush of sudden, weary anger. "We're honorable. We're decent. We keep our word. But we're fire, Kuei. When we get mad, things burn." He spread empty hands. "We're fire, and we're dangerous, and if you ever thought you could turn your back on a great name and be safe, I'd have to smack you for being an idiot. We are *not safe*. Fire makes you *act*, not think. A lot of us know that. A lot of us try to think our way out of things. But sometimes, we just *don't*." He drew in a breath, let it sigh out. "But we can be allies. We just have to find common ground. Not deals. Not loyalty. Just... some kind of promise both of us can keep." He glanced at Shirong. "I sent a proposal back with Agent Shirong's messenger."

"To carve out part of my kingdom and hand it over?" Kuei looked at him askance. "For one who claims to be going against Fire Lord Sozin's will, that looks *awfully* familiar."

Zuko raised a finger at a time. "First, there's hardly anyone up there anyway. It used to be close to Air Nomad territory, and your people still tend to stay clear. Second - the way the currents travel, right now it's probably getting hit almost as hard as the North Pole by angry spirits. I hope anybody who *is* there had sense to run. Third... Kuei. If this works, the mountain right next door is going to be full of airbenders. Do you *want* them right on the edge of your kingdom without a buffer?"

"No," Kuei admitted, after a moment's sober consideration. "No, I have to say I don't. I've read the Song of Li Feng. Some of my ancestors would never have been born of the desert winds if it wasn't for Monk Xiangchen." He smiled ruefully. "And if some were driven into the desert to sail the sands, who's to say some didn't hide among villages in the north, and forget the winds to live? To have some of their descendants seek it again, a millennium later. If the spirits like irony, it would serve that bloody-handed fanatic right."

"Monk Xiangchen?" Zuko said carefully. The name sounded familiar, almost. The way Ran's name was familiar, and the scent of burning fox fur. "Your majesty, are you saying there's *Air Nomad* blood in the Earth Kingdom?" From the shock on people's faces, he wasn't the only one who'd never heard this before.

"Oh, I'd imagine there's some everywhere." Kuei nudged his glasses up. "Not a lot; Xiangchen's followers held onto their scent like a shirshu. But-" He stopped himself, and shook his head. "We don't have time. I'll give Professor Wen a list of the scrolls I remember. I'm sure you can find more in the archive later." Behind glass, young eyes were intent. "Those records have to make it out with your ship, Prince Zuko. If Wan Shi Tong has been stealing from every unprotected library, and making the Dai Li themselves forget what they hold in their own keeping - you have no idea how much the world doesn't know."

"You have my word," Zuko promised. "I will care for them as I care for my people."

Which didn't mean he wouldn't sacrifice some to save the rest. If he had to. But if things went right...

Please let this work. Agni, if you're listening - I don't care if the truth does mean Sozin's a villain. If we can just find it, find some way to piece the world back together-

Wait. Somebody hadn't been surprised at Kuei's bombshell.

Teruko.

The lieutenant had known there was airbender blood in people who weren't Air Nomads. How? *Why?*

And why did even thinking about it make him feel angry and sick all at once? As if he'd pulled a man from a churning maelstrom... to realize a storm-wet hand had buried a dagger in his heart.

Spirits. He knew Amaya was busy with her own part of the evacuation, working with Meixiang; and, not coincidentally, keeping a careful eye on Min. Which was a good thing. Anybody who'd had Azula breathing down his neck *needed* some looking after. Just to be reminded the whole world wasn't knives and poison.

But I need to talk to you, Master Amaya. Soon.

"I believe you," Kuei said thoughtfully. And held out a hand. "I accept the word of Zuko, son of Ursa and Fire Lord Ozai."

Zuko clasped it, and shook.

"And Lee," Kuei added, smiling, "Amaya's apprentice. You're a yāorén?"

He knows? Zuko tried not to freeze. *Oh, no.*

Deep breath. Aang wasn't coming back to Ba Sing Se anytime soon. What Kuei knew shouldn't

matter. He hoped.

"That must be incredible; if we have time-" Kuei cut himself off, and chuckled a little. "But first, we need to double-check a map. I have it on *good authority* I can't just tell a great name to go ahead, and then turn my back on him."

"Damn right," Teruko muttered, satisfied.

Zuko felt himself smile in pure relief. *We can do this. We can.* "Big enough to hold us, and have defensible borders. That's all I'm asking."

"We'll see," Kuei said, with just a touch of amused haughtiness. Raised his eyebrows, and looked around the cavern. "Well? Shouldn't some of us be moving?"

"Hail his majesty!" went up from the center of the crowd.

"Hail Earth King Kuei!"

Listening to that thunderous cheer, Zuko straightened his shoulders. Even if everything else went wrong right now, even if Azula fell on their heads - Kuei's people were behind him.

You bit off Ba Sing Se, Azula. Now let's see if you can chew it.

"Hail Prince Zuko!"

...Wait. What?

Grinning, Teruko steered him by the shoulder out of the cheering crowd, falling into step with the Dai Li and Kuei as they headed for Kuei's maps. "Come on, sir. Let's go see how much damage a pair of great names can do to some borders."

A/N: *No hou e nohara* - "In the direction of the field" - adaptation of the Mexican Spanish *milpa*.

All right. About the North Pole. I am not trying to tell anyone what to think about whether what Aang did there was right or not. That, you have to decide for yourselves. I'm writing the *characters'* points of view. Zuko thinks the results of the North Pole were horrific; what else can he think, when his people died? The Northern Water Tribe, on the other hand, probably thinks it was the best thing since the invention of blubber jerky. And in the canon universe, the rest of the world (minus the Fire Nation) likely thinks that as well.

Here's *my* interpretation of the whole North Pole situation. In the canon universe, not Embers.

The Fire Navy aggressively and deliberately attacked the North Pole. And Zhao, who ordered it, and probably most of the higher-ups answering to him, *deserved* to get smashed to bits. (Your average sailor didn't, but given the situation - war is hell.)

Ignore that Aang could have come up with other solutions. (I thought of at least three, including 1) Use wind and water to "blow the fleet away", 2) Use wind and water to create a massive ice fortification around the Pole just like he did to divert lava from the volcano; this at the very least would buy them more time for a better plan, 3) Fly cover while the waterbenders used ice to gut the Fire Navy ships under the waterline.) Aang's a teenage boy under incredible pressure, it was a last-ditch situation, and you use the weapons you have to hand. So. Invasion fleet wiped out. Massive cheering. Yay, go good guys.

Except.

Except the Avatar is *leaving*. Has to leave, to master earthbending. And everyone knows that. And the Fire Nation *still has more ships*.

This is what gets to me about Aang in general, and the North Pole in specific. In the real world, actions have *consequences*.

A charge sometimes leveled at the Fire Nation, particularly in regard to the Siege of the North, is "genocidal". With respect to the Air Nomads, in canon, this is accurate. It's also a hundred years old, and there's no reason to believe anyone involved in that attack is still alive today. Still, the past is prelude, and Sozin is held up as a hero, meaning it's reasonable to consider that if they did it once, they'd do it again. But what happened to the Southern Water Tribe, while horrible, is *not* genocide. The Fire Nation is specifically shown going after *waterbenders*. Non-benders are fought, but wiping them out is not the objective. It may be the eventual result, but Fire Lord Sozin's (and so, it's implied, the Fire Nation's) goal was to *subjugate* the rest of the world. Subjugate: to forcibly impose obedience or servitude. Dead people aren't subjugated. Zhao's stated goal at the North Pole (before he led that raid on the Spirit Oasis) was to destroy the Northern Water Tribe's "greatest city". *Not* to kill them all.

Another charge leveled at the Fire Nation is "war criminals". Nice. Let's not belabor the point of how what constitutes a war criminal has changed over the centuries, or that the Avatar world doesn't seem to have ever had a Geneva Convention. Let's even gloss over that little incident with Earth Kingdom soldiers attempting to crush Iroh's hands while *he* was a POW, after he tried to escape.

Instead, let's take it as a given that many of the Fire Nation *are* war criminals. Let's even throw in genocidal. Zhao's intentions were certainly close enough (killing *the Moon*? Beyond Idiot Ball), and while Zhao is not a good sample of the Fire Nation as a whole, you can definitely argue that the Northern Water Tribe has no reason to know that.

So. You're the Northern Water Tribe, and you believe the Fire Nation are genocidal war criminals.

If that is the case, why would anybody approve of a defensive plan for the North Pole that *assumes they're not*?

If the Fire Navy is made up of reasonable, rational military men - then yes, Koizilla *will* stop them. For a while. The HSQ (Holy S*** Quotient) alone of that level of losses will make any sane admiral think twice. No matter what Ozai threatens them with.

If, however, the Fire Nation are war criminals bent on genocide - no. They won't stop. They'll barely even be slowed down. History shows that, over and over again. Genocides go on until there's no one left to kill... or someone stops the perpetrators *with force*. And makes it clear they will *repeat* said force, as often as it takes.

A person commits a criminal act for one overriding reason: because *he thinks he can*. The Fire Navy attacked the North Pole because they thought the Northern Water Tribe was weak enough that they could do it, and get away with it. They were wrong about the second part - but they were *right* about the first. And Koizilla has done *nothing* to change that impression. So the Fire Nation lost a whole fleet of the navy? They lost it *to the Avatar*. And they *know* that.

Which means, if anybody on Ozai's side is using any common sense at all, come the next new moon near the summer solstice (or even more likely, the return of Sozin's Comet), the Northern Water Tribe would get an *extremely* unpleasant surprise. When the firebenders come back to *finish*

the job.

Because given Koizilla, the Fire Nation is not afraid of the Northern Water Tribe. They're afraid of the *Avatar*.

And Aang *won't be there*.

The Fire Nation has been fighting this war for a hundred years, and searching for the Avatar just as long. They know what the Avatar's capable of, and what he's going to try to do; restore balance and defeat the Fire Lord. And they know exactly what destructive capability the comet's return is going to give them. In that coming summer, the Fire Nation knows Aang has one of three options. First, hide. He did it for a hundred years, after all. And if he does that... well, the Fire Nation has already proven someone can get into the middle of the Water Tribe's city itself to steal the Avatar away. So he probably won't hide there. Second, keep working on mastering earthbending or firebending; both of which, again, imply he *won't* be at the North Pole. Third, face Ozai and/or the Fire Nation forces, no matter what his training level, to try and stop the destruction to come. Again, very unlikely to be at the North Pole.

Plus the Fire Nation is running a war, and that implies scouts and spies. Aang's not exactly inconspicuous. No matter where he's *likely* to be, the Fire Nation stands a good chance of knowing where he *is* at any given point in time. Or at the very least, of knowing where he was a few days ago. They know how fast Appa flies; they know the bison's effective range without stopping for food, water, and rest. Given that, they know exactly what kind of window of time they'll have.

Ironically, genocidal or not, if the Fire Nation didn't have strategically sound reasons to attack the North Pole before Aang went there, they definitely do now. Aang won't be there. They have days of evidence that head to head, they can take the waterbenders as long as the daylight holds out. Crushing the Northern Water Tribe deprives Aang of powerful allies. The Water Tribes are supporting Aang's invasion of the Fire Nation itself; their own backyard. Add to the mix that the Fire Nation is *incredibly angry* over what happened to their fleet... oh yes. They might not be out for genocide, but they will be out to destroy any vestige of Water Tribe power. With extreme prejudice.

And if their object really *is* genocide, it won't matter what kind of vengeance Aang wreaks on them afterward. Because the Northern Water Tribe will still be dead... and Avatars are mortal. With the Northern Tribe gone, the Southern stripped of its waterbenders, and the Foggy Swambers roped into Sokka's invasion plan and about to get captured - Water is about to go the same route as Air.

"You have to; you're the Avatar!" Nice as a statement of idealistic faith, Yue. Utterly, totally wrong when it comes to saving your people. Because - as we see in canon with Kyoshi, and Roku, and Kuruk - if ordinary people believe they can't save *themselves*, then all a would-be conqueror has to do is get the Avatar out of the way, and your bad guys will think they can do anything. And if they think they can, someone *will*.

So why do I think Koizilla was both immoral and a terrible mistake? Because the point of a Weapon of Mass Destruction is *deterrence*. The only moral reason to have one, or to use one, is to prevent *worse* loss of life. Bluntly, "do not do X, or we will fry your butt with Extreme Prejudice... and if you do X, we *will* fry you."

Which, by the way, implies that you have *control* of your weapon. Which the Water Tribe - *and Aang* - did not. Aang in the Avatar State may not have control, but at least he's in the hands of every other Avatar before him, who *were* humans, and therefore have a chance of figuring out when to stop. Aang swept up in the Ocean Spirit's vengeance had *no* control, and turned all the power of an Avatar over to something that *isn't human*. That doesn't want what a human wants.

That has an IFF (Identify Friend or Foe) based *purely* on someone having the presence of mind to hit the ground kowtowing.

If you're in the middle of fighting for your life, you might not be able to think clearly enough to do that. And *then* what?

Koizilla unleashed mass destruction. Without restraint, without morality, and - unless someone's enough of an idiot to go threaten the Moon again - without the Water Tribe being able to *repeat* it. And given any survivors of Koizilla saw the Avatar in the middle of the fish-monster, even if Zhao took the secret of the Moon fish to his watery grave (and so far as we know from canon, Iroh and Zuko aren't talking about it), the Fire Nation knows it took the Avatar to summon Koizilla in the first place.

Meaning there is *nothing* to *deter* the Fire Nation from striking when Aang is *somewhere else*.

The morality of WMD revolves around "do not make us use this". But the Northern Water Tribe has *nothing to use*. They're sitting at the site of the worst disaster in Fire Nation naval history - I don't even want to think about how many widows and orphans that fleet must have left behind - and the Fire Nation has already shown that the Water Tribe is *toast* without the Avatar. On top of that, the tribe has stripped part of the defenses they did have, sending benders to the Southern Water Tribe. Aang has left them sitting ducks. Sitting ducks the Fire Nation now wants seared to *ashes*.

Stop looking at the morality of what Aang did to the Fire Navy, and start looking at the morality of what he did to his *allies*.

This is the interpretation I'm using to create the Embers AU.

And given the spirits are a lot more active in Embers than we saw in canon, anyone who has some historical background, or has studied spirits (which includes a lot of the characters Zuko has run into), has an idea of just what spiritual mess has been unleashed at the North Pole. It's not pretty.

By the way, if Zhao had let on to the fleet what he was about to do in Embers, he would have been *sleeping* with the fishes, not killing them. Someone would have had the guts to do it, whether it meant breaking loyalty or not. You do *not* mess with Agni's sister.

And just my personal opinion... if a *twelve-year-old boy* having mystical tacnuke capabilities doesn't qualify as High Octane Nightmare Fuel to you - when the Zombie Apocalypse comes, please hide in any bunker but mine.

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sitting quietly in a corner of *Suzuran's* bridge, Iroh sorted and checked lists and contingencies for their task. Part of him longed to be sneaking into the city himself, to play the proper hero and carry out his beloved over his shoulder, fireballs flying, gallantly declaiming his victory.

...Which would promptly earn him Amaya's snowballs down his spine, he had no doubt. Even if she did miss him as much as he did her.

Ah, well. He only hoped she would approve of the general as much as the tea-maker. And as a general, he knew where he needed to be. And it was *not* sneaking behind enemy lines, like younger and more impetuous souls. It was here; coordinating, listening, and granting the men calming smiles as supplies snaked down into the holds and Captain Donghai's acquaintances joined their plot.

After all, it wouldn't do to have their madness fail due to a lack of attention to detail.

Not quite madness, Iroh reflected. *Though I pray Azula will think it is.*

Under other circumstances, she'd be right. With the best will in the world, no Fire Nation commander could approach a lord of Earth and expect any fate better than an avalanche loosed upon his head.

But the Earth King knew his nephew, if in other guise. Knew Lee, and trusted him as Bosco's healer. At the very least, Kuei should allow him close enough to listen.

And Kuei should listen, Iroh reassured himself, nodding thanks as a crewman stopped just long enough to update him on the loading. *Shirong's report said that the Earth King was informed of our plan. And thought it had merit.*

Yet Iroh knew to his sorrow how rulers thought. And what they decided when a would-be ally was out of reach might change terribly when an enemy's blood seemed theirs for the taking.

If so... well. His nephew had faced the Avatar and survived. Zuko would do what he must, to win their people free.

He has the fire to lead, even when all the world seems mad. He has found a purpose worth fighting for. And he is your brother's son. If he has Ursa's kind heart, he has all of Sozin's will.

Which led to a somewhat lighter sigh, as Iroh wished, yet again, he were sneaking along behind Teruko. Kuei's face would be a wonder to behold. And he would *miss* it.

"Sir?" Seaman Saburo stopped before him; the weathered falconer's face uncertain, for once.

"Only a wish that I could be three places at once," Iroh smiled. "I had forgotten, these past six years, how frustrating a general's task can be. But it goes well enough, for now."

"I'll take your word for that." Saburo hesitated. "Sir. There's a problem."

A problem, Iroh thought wryly a few minutes later, entering a wardroom two levels down. *Indeed.*

"Master Sergeant Yakume," he said mildly, eying the man and his Earth Kingdom companion as they stood in the midst of a half-dozen unhappy sailors turned guards. "It has been some time." He glanced aside at Captain Jee, who looked as sober and determined as Iroh had ever seen him. "Thank you, Captain. I will deal with this."

"Sir." Worry, concern, the ever-tightening pressure of time; all in a look.

"We have a promise to keep to Sergeant Aoi and his men," Iroh pointed out. "I believe the master sergeant will make that safer for all of us. For that alone, I owe him answers. In private." At Jee's reflexive stiffening, Iroh only smiled. "There is still much that needs to be done."

For a moment, Jee looked mutinous. Then sighed, and nodded the guards out. "Don't make me have to explain this, General." Bowing, he left, shutting and sealing the hatch behind him.

"Is he crazy?" the Guard captain burst out. "We could-"

"Die," Yakume said bluntly. "Two of us, locked in with the Dragon of the West? We're dead whenever he chooses." He straightened anyway. "I gave Captain Lu-shan my word I would protect him here."

"It will be honored," Iroh said graciously. "Though if you knew I was here, why bring Captain Lu-shan into peril?"

"He should know the clan who's stolen one of his own."

"Ah," Iroh said softly. "Huojin." He inclined his head to the captain. "The fault is mine. I was my nephew's teacher. And by my own training, I am... resistant, to another firebender's call. I did not realize how strong my nephew had become. Nor how willing he would be to defend those of Ba Sing Se, when he had known them but a short while."

"You're saying you made a good Guard turn traitor by *accident*?" Lu-shan's fists clenched, and there was a reckless light in his eyes.

"Huojin is no traitor," Iroh said sternly. "Even now he serves the people of your city, with the Earth King's will." *I hope*. "Fire Nation, yes; he was born so, even as we. But we are not your enemies." He let his gaze rest on Yakume. "Which is why you are here. Is it not?"

"How?" A choked word, as Yakume shuddered with anger and pain. "How could you betray the Fire Lord? Betray your people? You led us across the Earth Kingdom; you held the siege for six hundred days! And then, when we knew the earthbenders would kill us all, you broke it and led us out-"

"And to break that siege," Iroh cut across his words, "I broke my loyalty to Fire Lord Azulon."

Yakume blanched. Lu-shan looked swiftly between them, anger fading into uncertainty, and a certain wary curiosity.

"It was my father's will that Ba Sing Se be crushed," Iroh stated. "No matter the cost. That was his wish; those were his orders, in private, between us. I did not argue, not then. For I had a vision, granted by the spirits, of throwing down Ba Sing Se's walls and conquering it completely." He weighed Yakume in his gaze. "I knew, when I ordered the retreat, it would cost me my life. And perhaps more, to deny the spirits' vision. But with my son, my Lu Ten gone... I no longer cared. So I acted, as a general should, and chose to save my men." He smiled, sad and wry. "Imagine my surprise, days later, when I woke to find I had survived."

"But..." Yakume almost swayed, white with shock. "If those were the Fire Lord's orders..."

"I should have been executed?" Iroh finished for him. "Yes. Once word reached Azulon of my betrayal... I knew my father, and he was not a forgiving man. But events moved in my favor. While I knew my life was forfeit, I also knew the spirits had given me that vision of Ba Sing Se. So I chose to vanish, as well as I could, and devote what weeks I might escape my father's grasp to a spirit quest. To learn *why*." He laughed softly, not quite bitter. "And Azulon died, and my brother took the throne. And Ozai was never present when our father gave me personal commands. My brother considered me a failure, but not a traitor. So, when I had found the answers the spirits allowed me... I came home." He sighed. "And it was well I did. For I found my brother's wife, Lady Ursa, vanished. On the very night of Azulon's death. And none would say where, or why. And I found my nephew, terrified and alone. Mother gone; father swept up in the glory of being Fire Lord, favoring his dark dragon of a daughter as heir in all but name." Iroh let his eyes narrow, just a flicker of anger showing clear. "Ozai *gave* him into my keeping, Yakume. A failed heir, to a failed prince. The words were never spoken, but my brother has never needed *words* to hurt."

"But... the prince is a *fire-healer*," Yakume protested.

"A gift he perfected only in exile," Iroh said steadily. "A power that belongs to one no longer loyal to the Fire Lord. He *survived*, Yakume. As I survived." Iroh drew a breath. "Yet if the Fire Lord's forces capture him now, he will be executed. *Because* he is a healer."

"That's crazy," Lu-shan said in disbelief. "You're all crazy."

"No." Almost a whisper, but Yakume's voice was steady. "It makes sense. Oh, Agni..."

"To break one's loyalty, is to douse one's inner fire." Iroh watched them both. "A healer can feed that fire. Can nurture embers even against the chill of death, until the spirit rallies... or fails."

"Prince Zuko can save deserters." Yakume's eyes were grim.

Iroh nodded. "And once that becomes known, my brother will try to kill his son. Again."

"Again?" Yakume looked ghastly, as if the steel deck had shattered under him into an arctic sea, and he stood on the last icy ledge before the abyss.

"I am curious," Iroh mused, silk over steel. "Does everyone assume my nephew was in a training accident?"

"Don't answer that."

Iroh didn't move as Lu-shan stepped forward; only raised one gray brow, curious.

"I don't like him," the Guard captain growled, jerking his chin Yakume's way. "He doesn't like me, my men, or my city. But so far, he's kept his word. Which puts him way ahead of an oath-breaker and a traitor." Lu-shan's eyes narrowed. "Why should we believe anything you say?"

Iroh winced, but nodded. "You have lived under the Dai Li; you know how easy it is for leaders to shade the truth. Which is more than some folk in the Fire Nation have learned." He sighed.

"Believe, or not. I ask only that you look at our actions, and judge them for yourself." He turned to Yakume. "You have always been a loyal soldier. I have no doubt, now that you have seen me, you will report my presence to your superiors. So we will have to hold you both here, until we are prepared." He paused. "If you would then see fit to take into your custody Sergeant Aoi and those others of the crew who would not follow Captain Jee, we will have fulfilled our obligation to good and loyal men, not to strand them amongst enemies. And you will have valuable intelligence..."

Forgive me, I will be blunt. You will have information that will distract Princess Azula from inquiring too deeply into the specifics of your visit here. I fear you will need that."

"Distract the princess?" Yakume said carefully.

The hairs on the back of Iroh's neck lifted. "Spirits. What has she done now?"

Lu-shan looked between them, and let out an exasperated breath. "It's not what she's done. It's what your boy's going to do. Challenge her to this - Agni whatsis, to win the city back. Which just means we get passed from one Fire Nation heir to the other, so why do you think any of us should even *care*..." The Guard trailed off, eyeing Iroh. "Only that's not the plan. Is it?"

"No, it is not," Iroh said simply. "If we are fortunate, none of us will meet Azula. Not myself, nor Prince Zuko, nor any of those refugees we are trying to save."

Yakume took a step back; jerked his gaze away, looking at *Suzuran* with fresh eyes. "You... you can't possibly mean..."

"Our people are more important than any orders," Iroh stated. "I am very proud of my nephew."

"But she's taken his place as heir!" Yakume protested. "He must challenge her!"

"No," Iroh said sharply. "She stands as the *only* heir, now. The spirits themselves have made it impossible for Prince Zuko to ever become Fire Lord."

"But-"

"Impossible," Iroh cut him off with a slash of a hand, face grim. "Speak with Sergeant Aoi, and you will understand. Admiral Zhao, in his arrogance and pride, set himself against the Moon. He wounded a great spirit, Yakume! And only through a valiant sacrifice was that damage healed. But it does not matter. One of the Fire Nation struck against the balance of the world. And Prince Zuko was *there*."

"He was cursed." Yakume shook his head slowly, wishing to deny it.

"The Moon herself has set her hand on my nephew, and she will not be shaken off," Iroh declared. "Princess Azula stands as heir. And as heir, she will execute traitors to the Fire Nation." He paused. "By my brother's decree, those who have fled our borders, who have hidden themselves, who wished nothing more than to live as honest citizens safe from the war... are traitors. All of them."

The wardroom seemed to chill. "Civilians," Lu-shan protested.

"It will not matter," Iroh said heavily.

"Guanyin's merciful veil, man - women and children!"

"It *will not matter*." Iroh stared him down. "Azula has sought her own brother's death since she was *six*. Do you think she will hesitate to slay other children? She will *not*."

Lu-shan recoiled. "And you mean to leave *that* as heir?"

"I intend," Iroh said with the driest irony, "to see what the Avatar chooses to do with her. It is, after all, the only choice the spirits have left me. Or would you have me slay my own brother and his daughter? If I could. I do not think I have the power." He shook his head. "Avatar Kyoshi inflicted the line of the Fire Lord upon our people. It will be *her* heir's choice if that will continue, and the

world face Fire Lord Azula in her turn." He met Lu-shan's gaze, and let the man see deadly gold. "Or do you follow where the Fire Nation has led, and doubt the Avatar?"

Lu-shan glared at him like a porcupine-boar eyeing a rival, and shook his head. "If you've known she was a monster that long, you should have done something years ago."

"Yes," Iroh acknowledged. "I should have. I was proud, and blind, and believed our nation had the right to conquer the world. But even then, I should have." He gazed back. "What wisdom I have gained, cost me my only son. Pray the Earth King's does not cost Ba Sing Se more than it already has." He gestured toward the hatch. "Gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to Sergeant Aoi."

Time, Iroh thought as they warily moved. *We have so little time.*

Still. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't enjoying this. Mastery of details, mastery of men; the knife-sharp brightness of the world, as he tested himself against his enemy's cunning.

I wonder if Kuei is enjoying this as well?

Iroh grinned wryly, thinking of a night years ago, when he'd talked a shaking, bloodied teenager down. If his young nephew had nurtured any last illusions of the glory of war and battle, they had died in a port's back alleys. Kuei's first deaths had only been at his orders, not at his own hands, but... *Probably not.*

"I think I'm going to throw up," Kuei gulped.

Quietly, trying not to draw attention to himself, Shirong rippled the floor to nudge a wastebasket into convenient range near Bosco's paws. He could have done more for the Earth King, but Quan and Bon were already hovering over the young monarch. And...

The Earth King, Shirong thought, soul weary. *Not my king.*

Oma and Shu - I asked for help, but I didn't ask for this! I wanted to help our city. I wanted to help... Lee.

His would-be recruit. The young man who'd just walked out of this council room a few minutes ago, with a map and a slightly dazed look. Whom Shirong had trusted above all others, to do what was *right*.

The Fire Lord's son. Shirong winced. *What do I do?*

"I can only imagine." Quan's eyes were shadowed. "Conquest is one matter. Voluntarily relinquishing part of the kingdom - I can't feel the spirit of the land, and I feel queasy. Fire Nation, lodged on our doorstep. That's going to be a problem one of these days." He shrugged as Kuei frowned at him. "It's probably worth it now to disrupt the occupation here. But planting born killers by a temple of pacifists? I know no one's liked them since Chin's time, but... well. I can understand why you're upset."

Kuei looked at him for a long moment. Turned away enough to scratch behind Bosco's ears, and looked again.

A little less green, Shirong judged, catching a hint of a rueful smile on Kuei's face. *Interesting.*

"Agent Quan," Kuei said thoughtfully, "were you listening to the prince? Or me?"

Quan was silent. Bon hesitated, then shot Shirong a speaking look.

"He was," Shirong said ruefully, bowing to that silent plea for rescue. "And if he heard what I heard, he heard plenty of reasons why Prince Zuko's people are going to have their hands full *now*. But in ten years? Twenty? They could be a force to be reckoned with. Unless something else is going to keep them in check. And while the North Pole is close, the Northern Water Tribe tends not to leave it in large numbers." He paused. "Or at least, they don't *now*. I think."

"You don't know?" Bon asked, surprised.

"I may know a lot about the Fire Nation, but I haven't read much about the North," Shirong answered. Met glass-framed eyes again. "We don't all study history, your majesty. And there's a lot of history in your library." Shirong smiled wryly. "It's not only possible you know something we don't, it's *likely*."

"...Oh." Kuei looked chastised. Straightened his shoulders, and took a deep breath. "There's a saying I ran across, in a book from Avatar Yangchen's time. If you want to besiege a city, use waterbenders. If you want to hold it, use earthbenders. If you want to take it, use firebenders. If you want to *destroy* it..."

He didn't have to finish. Quan absorbed that, and frowned. "The stories say the air monks were peaceful people."

"Yes, they do," Kuei said wryly. "But I find it hard to believe the twenty-first Earth King would have agreed to support the Northern and Eastern Temples in perpetuity out of the goodness of his heart. Just because *peaceful* people asked him to." He scratched behind furry ears again, letting Bosco lean into his hand. "My ancestors may have been good, evil, or indifferent, but they were never *charitable*. I've read every agreement binding Ba Sing Se. I *have* to know what my people are bound to do." He ducked his head a little. "I tried to be a good king."

"Just keep trying, sir," Bon said plainly. "It's a tough job."

"It's a big job," Kuei said quietly. "A lot bigger than I thought." He sighed. "So. I've read agreements, and contracts, and pleas for mutual aid, and... Guanyin have mercy, I've read the terms drawn up when Ba Sing Se crushed an enemy." He paused, eyes troubled. "The words aren't all clear, but I'd swear that time, it was the twenty-first Earth King who got crushed."

Quan hesitated, obviously thinking twice before he spoke. "We watched Avatar Aang, your majesty. He's a very... peaceful person. Most of the time."

"You mean, when he's not brushing aside my army like matchsticks, collapsing parts of my palace, and accusing people I trust of treason?" Kuei said wryly. "By those standards, Princess Azula is a peaceful person. *Most* of the time." He shuddered.

Shirong cleared his throat. "Your majesty, I think you're both missing the point. The people in the temple today are *not* Air Nomads. They were Earth Kingdom, and they're now threatened by the Fire Nation. I don't think *peaceful* is going to be high on their list of priorities." He glanced at Quan. "I've seen firebenders heal. How can I not believe some airbenders could kill? No matter how peaceful most of them might be."

"Pushed to their limits," Quan began.

"We're all pushed there, now." Kuei waved at one of the scrolls on the council room table, that had slipped out from under the various maps and documents he'd used to deal with Zuko. "Look at that

report, Agent Quan. *Look* at it. Our people, dead because of - because of my orders." He swallowed dryly. "I knew it was going to happen. I *knew* it. But to see it-" He cut himself off. "But I haven't really seen it, have I? You have to get me up to the surface."

"Your majesty," Quan shook his head, "it's not safe-"

"I have to know!" Kuei gripped the scroll, knuckles white. "I was safe in the palace, Agent Quan! While my people were hurt, and dying, and - and *worse*." He gulped. "No one is to learn mindbending. Do you understand me? No Dai Li is to do this ever again!"

Almost, Quan bowed. Clenched his teeth, and stood, wavering. "Your majesty. Someone has to know."

"There's no reason to *ever*-"

"It's been invented once, it can be invented again," Shirong cut in. "I'd listen."

Quan nodded curtly. "If someone else learns to bend minds, someone has to be able to recognize it. For your safety, sir. For the world's safety. If you want us to hold it secret, we will. If you want us to never use it again - that is your order, and we will obey. But *someone has to know*."

Kuei took a deep breath. Eyed his head Dai Li. "We're going to talk about this, later."

By which he obviously meant argue. But Quan bowed. "I am at your disposal, your majesty."

"Then you can find a way to let me see what happened to my people," Kuei shot back. "I don't care if it's dangerous. I need to *know*."

"Prince Zuko's plan-"

"Might create the best time," Shirong said thoughtfully. "The princess should be very distracted."

Kuei blinked. "They're planning to *avoid* her."

"I know they are," Shirong said sadly. "Spirit-wounds, your majesty. Lee- Prince Zuko is just as deeply marked as I am. General Iroh is of Sozin's line. Min Wen was dragged through *solid rock* by a palace specter. And his mother, and Lady Mai, and every Fire Nation refugee who's fled the war, is disobeying the Fire Lord, and so disobeying Avatar Kyoshi." He glanced aside, unwilling to let pain show. "It's a good plan. A *smart* plan. And for anyone else, it would work like a charm. But they'll be leaving Ba Sing Se and the Dai Li's protection. Which means they'll be drawing malice like flies to rotted meat." He winced. "Lee and Amaya are strong. They know spirits. But-" He cut himself off, aware he'd already said too much.

Silence. Bon looked bewildered; Quan, dubious. But Kuei sighed, and nudged his glasses up with a smile, as if finally admitting something he'd seen all along. "Then it's a good thing there's an expert in hostile spirits going with them."

"There is?" Shirong looked up, relieved. And oddly sad. "Who? I looked over the lists of those evacuating, but I was mostly concerned with the scrolls..." And why were they all looking at him?

"I have read about yāorén, Agent Shirong," Kuei said ruefully. "You need to train in fire, or someone's going to get hurt. And the only firebenders who've offered the Earth Kingdom aid, the only ones I'd trust with one of my Dai Li, are leaving." He smiled a little. "I know you all think I need to be protected. And I guess I do. But I *also* need to keep an eye on a great name. If I order you, will you go?"

He couldn't speak past the sudden lump of hope. Wordless, Shirong dropped to his knees.

"Get up, Agent Shirong," Kuei smiled. "Your family's waiting for you."

Dragon's eyes, Tingzhe thought, watching that uncanny pale gold blink as Amaya took her hand away from the prince's head. *Meixiang, beloved, I could have lived forever without knowing that.*

Hard enough to know his wife was of another nation. Though he'd grown to accept that, and cherish it, leaning on her strengths to complement his own. But to know part of her heritage, his children's ancestry, simply wasn't human...

Kneeling as she helped the younger children pack up the last of their household supplies, Meixiang smiled at him.

Tingzhe had to smile back, even as the packing reminded him that Luli and her family were doing the same just next door. As were countless other families, raising an odd murmur like waves against stone that made him want to shiver with the knowledge of time slipping away.

But he set that twinge of fear aside, rolling his eyes slightly toward Zuko's side of the room. Where Lieutenant Teruko was watching Mai like a cat at a weevil-rat hole, Mai was not quite glaring right back, and Min was trying not to look too hard at either of them, for fear of starting a second war.

Meixiang hid a giggle behind her hand, cinching down ties on the light wood chest. "So how did he get that water out of his eyes, Amaya?"

"Kind of by accident?" Zuko said awkwardly. "I was... sick."

Loyalty sickness. In a firebender. Tingzhe murmured a silent prayer. Just surviving, the young prince had likely used up every last bit of goodwill any spirit had felt for him, ever. And then some.

"And when I woke up the next morning... it was just gone," Zuko shrugged.

"You don't seem to have done yourself any harm," Amaya judged. "This time." She gave him a look askance. "But I would sleep easier if you never caught another lightning bolt."

"Makes three of us," Zuko muttered. "At least I did it right." He frowned. "So there's nothing wrong in my head?"

"Physically, no," the waterbender said levelly.

Zuko winced. "So there is something."

"I've never touched a spirit the Avatar has touched. I can't swear it was Yangchen." Amaya looked sober. "But something did try to interfere with you. *Tried*," she emphasized, as Zuko grimaced. "You threw it off."

"Are you sure?" Desperation flickered in pale gold. "If it was just me - Agni, I'm used to spirits going after me. But you're all depending on me. I have to have a clear head." Zuko swallowed dryly. "And I keep remembering things I *can't know*."

Mai's head snapped up, alarmed. Swung toward Teruko, dark gold narrowing. "What do you know?"

Caught, the marine glanced over suddenly unfriendly faces. She drew a deep breath, and sighed.

"Sir, it's complicated. And you're right; you need to keep your head, and focus on getting us out of here." She chewed her lip. "There's a reason you know what you know. A good one. Maybe Yangchen poked the right place to wake it up. Maybe you just got desperate. But what you remember, sir? It's true. And it's *not* from Yangchen."

"Then what is it from, Lieutenant?" Amaya's voice was cool, and her hand hovered near her waterskin.

"Complicated, ma'am," Teruko said steadily. "But General Iroh knows." She looked at Zuko. "And Toph knows."

Some of the tension eased out of Zuko's shoulders. "Toph knows?"

"She had that scary little smirk on her face," Teruko confirmed. "She promised she wouldn't mention it, sir."

Amaya glanced at them both, and laughed softly. "You trust her, and Iroh trusts her. I have to talk to this girl."

"Tough as mountains, and sharp as a Piandao sword," Teruko said firmly. "Sokka's not bad, either. If the Avatar's still alive after whatever the Water Tribe fleet's planning, I'd lay odds it's because of them."

"What they're planning?" Tingzhe frowned.

"Katara was carrying plans from the Earth King's generals when I caught her," Zuko told him. "I didn't see them again after I woke up on the beach. Maybe she hung onto them, and gave them to Chief Hakoda. Or..." He shook his head. "Not our problem. Not now. Are you ready? I didn't mean to slow anyone down."

"It's just as well you did." Shirong wove through the standing stone screens, a pack over his shoulder and a tentative smile on his face. "I'd hate to miss the train."

"You're coming?" Min blurted out. "I mean, you should come, you're family - spirits, that's weird - I mean-" Crimson, he searched for words.

"It is going to take some getting used to," Shirong admitted, green eyes alight with humor. "Don't think it will make your lessons any easier. And there will be a lot of them. That specter dragged you half out of the mortal world to pull off that little miracle of hers. Either you train to fight spirits, or you resign yourself to a very short, very unlucky life." He glanced at Tingzhe, just for an instant.

The archaeologist sighed, but nodded. "It's not the life I would have chosen for you," he said plainly, meeting his son's gaze. "But if the two of you can return the Dai Li to what they used to be, and defend our people - I am proud of you."

"Dad." For a moment, Min looked as if he'd step over for a hug. But he rested a hand on Mai's arm instead, careful not to grip anywhere that would impede the flow of knives. "This isn't exactly proper, we don't have a go-between, and we don't really have time- um." He swallowed dryly. "Dad? This is Mai."

"Oh, good luck," Zuko muttered. And clapped a hand to his own face, reddening, as Mai glared at him.

"Really, young man," Meixiang chuckled, standing and dusting her hands off. "What a horrible

thing to say about your cousins!"

Tingzhe blinked. Min choked. Jia and Suyin clapped their hands over Jinhai's eyes and ears, staring. And Mai... smirked.

"*Cousins?*" Zuko yelped.

"Third degree, fraternal," Mai stated, cool as if she were bored. Only the light in her eyes revealed how much she was enjoying watching the prince squirm. "Meixiang quizzed me up and down my family tree until we were both sure."

"Fraternal?" Breath left Zuko's lungs in a rush of relief. "Thank Agni."

"Third degree, I understand," Tingzhe put in, as Jia and Suyin let go of their squirming younger brother. The nobles and merchant clans of Ba Sing Se might marry far closer, after all; and it was rumored some of the desert tribes considered half-siblings a most acceptable match. "But why *fraternal?*"

"Dragon's blood," Teruko stated. "Sisters' children marrying can be a bad mix. Fraternal works. Third degree is even better." She frowned. "May I ask the ancestry, ma'am? I thought I knew all Byakko's branches."

"We're not of Byakko." Meixiang smiled. "That spirit came to you, Min, because she knew you had the power to help her manifest. That connection to the spirits skipped my generation, but with your father's blood... you have it." She nodded, decided. "My great-grandfather was Fire Sage Gyokuro, brother of Ilah and Momiji. Son of Ta Min, and Avatar Roku."

Zuko turned dead white.

No, no, can't be-

"Breathe, young one." Cool hands against his temples; a familiar, trusted voice murmuring in his ear. "Zuko. Lee. Breathe."

Lee. He clung to that like an anchor in a hurricane. Lee was Water Tribe, was Foggy Swamp; far from noble machinations and the ravages of war. Lee wouldn't care who'd been born of what clan. Not when they were all his people, and in danger.

The evacuation. Azula. Focus!

Breathe. Hold. Out. Repeat.

It felt like an eternity, but eventually he was able to focus on worried blue.

Agni. I hurt.

"You didn't know," Amaya realized, one hand still on his shoulder as she eased back a little to give him air. "Your people are obsessed with family trees. How could you not know?" She rounded on Mai, eyes flashing. "You knew."

"I knew about Momiji," Mai protested. "I knew she was Ta Min's and Avatar Roku's daughter. Adopted out, because she wasn't a firebender. Half the court knew. No one said she had siblings! I didn't know Roku had any other children. Not until Zuko told me General Iroh tracked down Ilah's mother." She glanced at Zuko, and blanched.

Uncle knew. And he didn't tell me. "I have to go burn something down now," Zuko said, very calmly.

At least, he thought it was calm. From the way Teruko and Shirong grabbed his shoulders, and the slash of water whipping about Amaya's hands, they somehow didn't hear it that way.

Could break loose. Don't want to hurt them. Maybe if I just explain? "I really have to," Zuko told them. "Sozin's fault. Probably. But Uncle should have said." Didn't seem to be getting through. "Above Ilah. The tree's blank."

"It's true," Mai said warily, hands full of steel. "Fire Lady Ilah, wife of Fire Lord Azulon. The record ends there." She swallowed. "I always thought it was a boast. Part of the Fire Lords' power. Sozin's line is so powerful, they can choose a wandering firebender for a bride, and never stoop to admit her clan."

"But Uncle knew," Zuko insisted, feeling that fierce clarity seeping away into a gulf of pain. "He found Ta Min. In the records. He *knew*."

"I suppose he didn't think you'd take it well," Shirong said dryly.

Zuko gave him a *look*. *I have heard some inane things in my life, but that crosses into tarred-and-set-on-fire territory.*

"Obviously," Shirong muttered to himself. "Easy. Easy, now. I know you probably blame Roku as much as Sozin for this whole idiotic mess-" He stopped. And winced. "Ah. Yes. I imagine if I had someone whom I considered a congenital idiot in my family tree, I'd want to break a few things myself."

Yes! Zuko thought, thrumming with fury against the hands holding him. *Yes, exactly, now if you'd just let go so I can-*

Hands holding him. Shirong's, and Lieutenant Teruko's.

Where I lead, she will follow.

I can't dishonor that trust. I can't.

Gritting his teeth, Zuko reached for Lee, pulling water's *tribe* around him as a shield against the pain of knowing yet another soul he'd trusted had lied.

A boy from the Foggy Swamp wouldn't care about family trees. Wouldn't feel that soul-deep agony of knowing he'd shown *disrespect* to an ancestor spirit. No matter how much that ancestor deserved it. Lee knew that these people were his tribe; that Uncle, lies of omission or not, was his tribe. And that Roku was *not*.

He sagged, trying not to just lean against their hands. "You should take over, Lieutenant," he got out. "I'm... not in good shape to command, right now."

"If you were that bad off, you wouldn't be able to talk, sir." Teruko let go. "There's a reason Lady Kotone lets your grandfather handle the idiots she doesn't want alive anymore. He's *good* at it. But he can keep his temper when he has to. So I know you can, too." She gave him a wicked grin. "I promise, after we get out of here, I'll help Sergeant Kyo's squad pin the general down so you can yell at him."

Oh. Zuko blinked, trying not to giggle hysterically. He didn't think he'd be able to stop. "That's the

nicest thing anybody's said to me all day." He blinked again, dragging the pain and all-encompassing *white* in sight and hearing down enough to *think*. "Plan. Train. We were going to grab one at night, in the first plan. Now it's day, we figured out a way to still do it but with everything that happened last night there's going to be patrols *everywhere*..."

Tingzhe frowned. "Should we wait until nightfall?"

"No. Have to move," Zuko said shortly. "Azula's alive, she's smart, and she doesn't just assume things are going fine. She checks. We don't have enough people to fight our way out. If we try, a lot of our people will get killed. We have to *move*. A good plan violently executed now-"

"-Is better than a perfect plan later," Shirong nodded. "I always did like General Katsu's treatises. Pithy man." He smirked. "As for getting everyone to the train in one piece... I have an idea."

"You're really worried," Ty Lee observed.

Surveying the palace grounds from this bone-breaking height, hands clasped neatly behind her back, Azula tilted her head just enough to watch Ty Lee turn easy cartwheels along the balcony railing. All the fearlessness of air, bouncing back from the morning's terror with a smile as wind ruffled her pink outfit.

Fearless, impulsive, and detached from the world in ways that just weren't healthy, Azula mused. But not stupid. Ty Lee knew what she wanted, from the circus to fighting the cutest guys among their enemies, and arranged her life to get it.

Not stupid, Azula decided. *Simply... alien*.

"Is it Agent Chan's report?" Ty Lee pushed herself up on her fingertips; grinning, delighted, as a sudden gust of wind made her work to keep her balance.

"Yes, and no," Azula said thoughtfully. Why not bounce her ideas off Ty Lee? The girl had no current reason for treachery, and a sideways viewpoint might be just what she needed. "The Dai Li's reports are part of a puzzle. Or should I say, parts of several, possibly unrelated puzzles."

"Ooo!" Ty Lee twisted, hands now flat on the railing and feet over her head as she looked up. "You mean, like someone dropped three sets of shell-matching games all together?"

Not stupid at all, Azula nodded to herself. "Precisely. In New Ozai, the Earth Kingdom resistance was able to pull off a mass evacuation, and seriously set back our hunt for the Avatar. Yet they had weeks to organize and prepare. Here, we see even more damage, but whoever has Kuei could only have had a few days to plan. No one organizes frightened civilians and stray military forces together that quickly."

"Not even us?" Ty Lee's brows went up in honest curiosity.

Damn. That was a good point. One she must have missed while she'd had a bruised brain. "You're right," Azula admitted. "Just because they're traitors, doesn't mean they're not of our blood. Fire Nation civilians could do it. If they had a lord to rally behind." She paced the balcony slowly, thinking it through. "No great name could have survived fleeing here, but they have had someone to act as a focus. Water can pull almost as well as fire. I doubt she could lead them, but if she had the intelligence to simply say *we need sabotage*, and stepped out of the way to let them deal with whoever has Kuei... yes. That would work." Another slow circuit. "If she's been hiding them for years, that could also explain her connection to Brush-maker Tu's organization." Who'd left them a deserted shop and bewildered neighbors; she'd had to have men tear the place literally apart before

they found the wood-lined escape tunnel. Even then it'd dead-ended in a natural stone grotto under the city, with no trace left to lead them further. "So we know two of our players."

Ty Lee frowned. "Tu's not with Amaya?"

"No." Azula weighed fact and intuition in her mind. "No, whatever Tu's part of, it's organized. And has been for some time. He had code words, hidden compartments, escape routes. Organized espionage. The waterbender's preparations weren't hidden. They simply didn't look like everything they were." What was it Quan had said about Zuko? He'd hidden in plain sight, by looking like just what he was: a desperate refugee. He just hadn't shown *everything* he was.

Not a plan. A gamble. An improvisation.

No wonder he'd had no trouble passing as Amaya's apprentice. The waterbender must have been improvising for decades.

"Two different operational procedures," Azula concluded. "Two different organizations. One, Water and Fire. The other... probably Earth. There's no love lost in this city for the Dai Li." She looked down at a topiary bear far below, briefly considering what it would look like on fire.

Lovely. But this is no time to indulge myself.

There were still too many unanswered questions. Two loosely allied covert groups could have made last night's mess in Ba Sing Se. And yet...

Three sets, Ty Lee had said. And while the acrobat might have a fluffy grasp on facts, her intuition could shame a general.

Tu's group seemed dug in to watch and vanish; a network of spies, more than anything else. Amaya's traitors had been hiding as ordinary citizens, but they *were* Fire. Once Mai needed aid to rescue her half-blooded crush, they'd have provided the drive needed to spur stolid Earth into action.

But some of that action didn't make sense. Why steal the royal library? Never mind the reason Agent Chan had given about the Earth King's reading habits; that library was *information*, pure and simple, and somehow valuable enough for Shirong's rogue band to risk their lives to grab it. For that matter, why steal half a dozen of the other things that had vanished in last night's fires? Weapons, yes, that made sense; but farming tools? Stocks of seasoned hardwood? Ingots of copper and iron? The list went on, and why anyone would risk a good diversion for such plebian supplies-

Suzuran is a supply ship.

Captained by Jee. Who had served Zuko *with Iroh*.

And if Iroh had already outlived treachery at the North Pole, he would have survived where Zuko perished.

For a moment, she didn't dare breathe. It was like turning a kaleidoscope; suddenly all the stray elements that looked like chaos *fit*. Beautifully.

"We're caught in one of my uncle's plans," Azula murmured. Slowly, ruthlessly, smiled. "To the train station. We haven't a minute to waste."

"General Iroh's here?" Wide-eyed, Ty Lee flipped off the railing to stand.

"Yes. Yes, I think he is." Azula indulged in a smirk. "We should say hello."

"Captain!" Saburo stopped just inside the bridge hatch, weathered face creased with worry.

"Hawks are moving. Palace toward the Army encampment, and heading for the port. Kei and a few of the men are watching, but..."

"There's a limit to what we can see from here." Jee felt a cold chill down his spine, but nodded.

"Thank you, Seaman." He glanced at the general. "Sir?"

"I suspect Princess Azula has finished breakfast," General Iroh said dryly. "Most likely, we are discovered."

Jee felt for where the sun was, and gave the general a troubled look. "Sir. Even if the prince is on schedule..."

"Azula's forces will reach us before he can." Iroh stared into the distance, quiet and grim. "Pass the order to begin casting off."

Meaning sailed vessels would go first, to clear each other's way. *Suzuran* could move no matter the wind, and outrace them all, a lion-dog to guard the koala-sheep. So they would wait. Even so...

"Sir. The *time*."

"My nephew will find a way to reach us," Iroh said soberly. "He must. He cannot go to ground again. Azula has lost a prize she meant to lure in our people to their own destruction. To civilians, and a *healer*. She will have Ba Sing Se torn up stone by stone to find them. If these ships are taken, we lose our best chance of escape."

"Sir." Jee stood straight. He should carry out the general's order immediately. He *should*. "If it were only him and Lieutenant Teruko - of course they could make it. But thousands of civilians... and he may not even know anything's wrong."

"Oh, he will," General Iroh said dryly. Gestured toward the harbor. "Our beacon will be unmistakable."

"Don't tug on it," Shirong chuckled, just loud enough to be heard over the clink and clack of yet another train-car of supplies rolling out of their warehouse to link up to the passenger cars. Hopefully, no one would care that far more cars were coming out than could be fit into the building; cars generally had to be lifted by earthbenders up to rail level anyway, so it wasn't unusual for canny Ba Sing Se merchants to move whole shipments of goods underground to get a jump on their competitors. "Leave it alone. You'll ruin all the ladies' hard work."

Zuko scowled, but snatched his hand away from the emerald-tied braid irritating the back of his neck. He wasn't quite sure how Meixiang and her daughters had managed to pin and weave it into his own hair, and he wasn't sure he *wanted* to know. He definitely could have lived the rest of his life without hearing Min giggle at the results. And as for that wicked gleam in Amaya's eyes as she added her own touch to the indignity...

I'm doomed.

Even if he managed to rip it all out before he got on *Suzuran* - better yet, *burn* it all out - he still wouldn't be able to head off Uncle's teasing. Lieutenant Teruko might keep loyally silent, no matter how annoyed she was at temporarily yielding her bodyguard position to Shirong, but Amaya would tell Uncle *everything*.

The universe hates me.

But Shirong's plan just might work, damn it. So the city was up in arms, with Dai Li and Fire Nation soldiers inspecting every train? Then there would *be* Dai Li and soldiers inspecting this train. *Theirs*.

"Everyone knows I won't work with a partner," Shirong had said bluntly, bringing out the uniform with an amused flourish. "So if they see a pair of Dai Li, and they *don't* see Min, they'll know it's not me."

"I'm not an earthbender," Zuko had protested, as Jia let out an ominous squeal and dove for her beauty supplies.

"No. But you move more like a *Dai Li* than most earthbenders," Shirong had stated. "If we put someone in uniform who's likely to fall off a roof, who even *acts* like they're afraid of falling - the game's over right there." He'd grinned. "Given what I've seen you do with ice - what do you think you can do with wet sand?"

Not as much as he'd like. Not without more time to practice, at least. But he just had to *look* like he was wearing earth gloves. If anyone got suspicious enough to check closer, the game was up anyway.

Not a game.

A game wouldn't terrify him like this. So much could go wrong. So much already had; getting civilians moving wasn't anywhere near as fast as moving troops. And though he'd known that, he'd planned for it-

We're late.

They could push the train faster to make up the time. If they didn't mind attracting every hostile eye in miles. And what earthbenders could do to a train with just a little warning... it wasn't a pleasant thought.

Though that was easier to think about than the memory of screams still ringing in his ears. Children didn't understand risking your life for your people. Children didn't understand war, and choosing lords, and why families who'd always been there were suddenly splitting apart.

Amaya and the herb-healers who were coming had had to dose some of the little ones. Particularly one young girl who'd just turned up in a train car at the last minute, with no parents in sight.

Agni, please let them be on this train. Somewhere.

Much, much easier to go over the obstacles again in his head. Getting out of this train yard; a massive stone edifice where Ba Sing Se's various low-class trains staged, before rumbling onto the sky-high web of stone tracks across the city. Getting across the massive expanse of land between here in the Outer Ring and the harbor itself. Getting past the guards on what was left of the Wall. Unloading at the harbor... spirits, that was going to blow their cover right there. At least all the cars were mostly made of stone, roofed with wood and clay to lighten the weight a bit. If they were quick, their earthbenders could just move whole cars onto various ships-

And the car he was checking suddenly exploded in yells, a spear punching out a window's paper screen in a rush of green flames, blue-green fire impaled on its point.

Hinotama!

Another fiery ball floated out from under the car, followed close by three more.

...So much for being inconspicuous.

After everything else she'd seen these past few days, a pair of Dai Li fighting spirit-flames by a train car warehouse barely made Azula blink.

"Ouch," Ty Lee winced, as one of the agents went down, then slapped a hand on the platform that shot barbed stalagmites up to pierce a glowing fireball.

"I see someone didn't handle a suspicious death or four well." Azula eyed the remaining globes as they seemed to halt and hover a moment, then dove back into the train car. The Dai Li's partner didn't even waste time swearing; just leapt through the burning window after them, murder evident in every line of his uniform.

"Odd place for them," Azula mused, as a horrendous racket broke out inside the car. Usually the creatures lurked by swamps, the better to lure in victims to drown. "How would they lead someone astray here... ah." She looked off the raised stone embarkation platform toward the elevated tracks, and the bone-crushing height between them and the farmlands. Distract the earthbenders guiding the train, and the resulting crash would yield enough dying souls to snack on.

Filthy beasts.

"Maybe we should help," Ty Lee said, troubled.

"We have a general to stop," Azula said levelly, heading to the passengers' platform and the occupation forces charged with inspecting the trains. At the foot of the stairs below, on the north side of the station, a few komodo-rhino cavalry riders were watering bored mounts.

Nothing's happening here. But that's no excuse to get sloppy.

Which was why she was checking every station as she reached it, not simply heading straight for the harbor. Her messages had already gone ahead, after all; and it would be criminally careless to miss some of Iroh's traitors through being impatient.

"Besides," Azula observed, glancing back as the noise started to die and some brave citizen beat out the window-frame, "they don't sound anywhere near dead yet."

Stoic enough to make her wonder if they were dead. Though most likely they were just numb from the invasion. The car quieted, and the younger Dai Li came out - through the sliding doors, this time, brushing himself off with an aggravated bristling that should have filled the air with smoke. The pair of them climbed to the roof, clinging there as the train's earthbenders calmly pushed off...

I know those moves.

"Azula?"

There was a braid, and there was a uniform, and she didn't *feel* fire, and he was supposed to be *dead*, frost blacken him, dead, dead, *dead!*

He's getting away-!

"Get me earthbenders!" Azula snarled, already running for the main stationhouse, Ty Lee racing beside her. "They're *on that train!*"

"You know," Shirong mused, as a single car bolted from the station and raced toward them, "I was actually starting to feel good about this plan."

"Huh," Zuko muttered, staring at oncoming doom.

"The universe hates us," Shirong sighed.

"Yeah."

"You don't sound surprised," Shirong said wryly.

"No."

"Much as I admire brevity," Shirong glanced at the firebender, "Lieutenant Teruko says it's not a good sign when you can't talk."

She'd said quite a bit more than that, when he'd been patiently explaining to her why she could not cling to her prince's side as a bodyguard while he was impersonating a Dai Li. Much of it in the common speech. Some of it in High Court. A fraction of which was actually repeatable in polite company.

If they lived through this, he had to get her to write those down.

"Can you cut the tracks?"

Shirong almost choked. Cut the rail line? Damage the city, and commerce, and the prestige of the Dai Li-

Stop the very angry firebender coming to kill you? part of him snarked.

Ah. Yes. Good point. "Not from here," Shirong said, already running toward the end of the train, Zuko half a step behind. He could feel the faltering in their speed, as the benders pushing the train saw what was coming-

The train jerked, almost tossing him off before he latched onto the yellow clay tiles of the roof ridge with chi and a twist of his toes, holding him steady.

Lee!

The firebender let himself fall, hitting the roof with an almost casual grab; as if he thought human fingers could somehow bite into green wood shingles-

Crunch.

Imperial firebender, Shirong realized, barely hesitating as he ran for the last, deliberately empty car. His partner could obviously keep himself in one piece, and there was no time. *Use your chi to enhance your strength. Damn, that's a nice trick.* "Move forward!" he called to the train-pushers, as the cars shuddered again; Tingzhe and his university students in the front of the train, no doubt, trying to find a rhythm most of them had never trained for. "Tell the passengers to get clear! Move at least three cars up, and push from there!"

"But," one of the earthbenders gulped, looking back with eyes so wide he might just jump off the tracks entirely.

Can't blame him, Shirong thought fleetingly, seeing murder in the Fire Princess' tense shoulders.

"Move!" he yelled. "Do you want to be somewhere she can catch you?"

That did it. The pair scrambled along the thin ledge of stone around the cars, disappearing forward.

Wish I could disappear my- Guanyin!

Trained reflexes saved him. Barely. He peeled up a long shield of the ridgeline's tiles, and dove to one side. Felt lightning strike home, as if in his own bones-

Zuko caught him by his robes and yanked, pulling him back onto green shingles before he could tumble off the edge.

Fire roared.

For a moment, Shirong could only stare. The other train was still yards away. But jets of blue flame surged from hands and feet as the princess *blasted* toward them-

Ceramic shattered, and Zuko tossed shards with deadly aim. Azula had to bring her hands forward to blast them away, dropping out of sight.

I didn't hear a splat...

Then he couldn't worry about what he hadn't heard, because pink bounced through the air almost on top of him. Reflexively, Shirong flung out chains, a net that would snare any mortal or spirit that dared get this near-

She dodged them.

Straight into a blinding face-full of wet sand.

Ty Lee was the enemy. Ty Lee would kill him; or take away his bending, and with Azula on the rampage that *would* kill him. Shirong knew all of that, and still had to force himself to turn away as she tottered near the edge. She just seemed so *innocent*.

The fireball that seared his hat off was anything but.

Shards and shale - that's cloth washed in fire! If Azula can char that...

"Stay down, Ty Lee!" Zuko snarled. "I don't want to hurt you!"

Scraping sand out of her eyes, the chi-blocker collapsed to her knees with a bone-jarring thump. "Zuko?" she whispered, barely audible above the wind. "But... you're *dead*."

"Not quite." Azula smirked, flipping up onto the roof to eye them all. "I should have known you wouldn't have the honor to lie down and die."

Honor. Zuko breathed out, slow and controlled, waiting for the word to tear at him. Three years - three long, horrible years - it had ruled his life. Three years, he'd declared to anyone who would listen that he needed his honor back...

I didn't want my honor. I wanted my family.

And wasn't that pathetic, to want what he should have known he could never have?

My family is on Suzuran, and on this train. It doesn't matter what I want. It doesn't matter if she's

my sister. Azula will kill them.

Unless they stopped her. Here. Now.

"Walk away," Zuko growled, trying not to let his voice shake. "Just *go*, Azula. You're the heir now. These people aren't the enemy. Leave them alone."

"They're traitors to Father." Azula shifted into a ready stance, easily as if the wind pressing on them all was just a spring breeze. "There's only one sentence for treason."

Blood drummed in Zuko's ears, and he felt the world narrowing around him. "Did you watch?" he got out through clenched teeth, holding onto words by pure will. "When *Mom* was a traitor?"

The roof erupted in fire.

Normally, she'd send guards or Mai or Ty Lee in first to soften up her enemies, then take a calculated second strike. Especially against Zuko, who could slip into a white-hot, mindless berserk in the time it took to call him a fatherless bastard.

Normally. But she'd outstripped her swamped Dai Li, Mai was probably somewhere on this train, and Ty Lee looked like someone had broken her. As for Zuko...

Pale gold blazed at her, but his breathing was calm. Controlled. Even as she shot a sizzling blast at him and he moved a grimy hand as if to catch it, the idiot...

Not dirt, Azula recognized in the instant before screams would come. *Why is his hand covered in sand?*

Steam boiled into the wind, as flames sank into sand like water.

...*What?*

A shake of Zuko's hand - Zuko's *untouched* hand, where there should be blisters and charred flesh and screams, damn him, why were there no *screams*-

Sand rose into a spiral over his palm, like a miniature dust-devil, heat shimmering off it like the Si Wong dunes.

Hot sand, Azula realized in an instant of shocked comprehension. *Agent Quan said he could move hot water, if he's learned to do that trick with something else...*

Fire against fire, she could take her brother any day of the week. This ground should *favor* her. She was lighter. More agile. With far more will, and discipline, meaning *far* more fire.

But if Zuko could bend more than just fire...

It won't matter. It's a trick. A coward's gamble to hide among the masses here. I have no reason to fear him. Ever.

Zuko spun the sand over his left hand, gaze never leaving hers, even as his right beckoned to the roof's flames like the Avatar's annoying waterbender to a river-

Which was when the chunks of stone Shirong had bent out of the car under them slammed at her like Mai's darts, and she was suddenly too busy to analyze anything.

A *waterbender*, Yakume thought, running through what he'd learned from Sergeant Aoi and his men yet again as they waited in the cool of the station. *It doesn't make sense.*

"We should be raising the alarm," Sergeant Aoi grumbled. Eyeing any of the seamen who looked inclined to stumble near the platform guardrail, or head anywhere near the straggly crowd of Earth Kingdom farmers. Some of those in the station were finishing up business with the paper-pushers after getting out of the city proper; others were waiting for the next train in. None looked happy to see men in red and black... but so far, they seemed willing to just keep their distance.

"You saw how quick your general cut us loose," Captain Lu-shan grumbled. "I'd say it's already been raised."

Seaman Koki gave him a narrow look. "You *would* say-"

"I don't care what you think about me, you salt-warped idiot," Lu-shan cut him off, "but the guy who got you off that ship thinks it's a good idea to lay low for a while. I'd listen. You weren't there when the master sergeant brought your princess information about rebels right under her nose. That... young lady... there's something *off* about her." He rolled his eyes. "And don't tell me. 'The line of Sozin's supposed to be dangerous.' I've seen *dangerous*. And I've seen flat-out crazy. You don't speak ill of nobles, but I know which bin I'd drop her in."

Aoi glared at him, and cast a glance Yakume's way. Lu-shan did the same, tapping his foot. Waiting.

They were all waiting, Yakume realized with a start, looking away from the mesmerizing stone-pillared rails, and the green fields so very far below. "Captain?"

"Master Sergeant," Lu-shan said dryly. "So far today I've faced down a pair of your marines, followed you on a hunt better left to Dai Li, been held at fireball-point by the Dragon of the West, and had to stand this bunch of *sailors* on a train ride to the middle of nowhere while your brain's been spinning its wheels. *Talk.*"

Aoi bristled like a shaggy cliffside. But turned a look of quiet entreaty on him, as well.

Yakume sighed, and shook his head. "I've been trying to piece things together," he admitted. "Some of what I know still doesn't make sense. And I would prefer to make a complete report." One he could, hopefully, write up and arrange to deliver impersonally. Giving him time to get clear.

He was loyal to the Fire Nation. Above all else. He wasn't *stupid*.

I think she might be on the edge. Lu-shan thinks she might be. Which means... maybe, just possibly, she is.

A dark dragon, General Iroh had called her. When *no one* spoke of the dragon blood in the Fire Lord's line. Officially.

The general had to be wrong. He *had* to be. The Fire Lords led their nation with honor. It could *not* be true that Fire Lord Ozai would want... such a creature to succeed him.

Yet if he believed that... the general was *wrong*. Or lying.

He never lied. Not to us. Not to any of his men.

Though Yakume had known that the general could be a bit... selective with the truth. Especially

when he was setting a trap.

And we're the trap.

And... Lu-shan was eyeing him. Again.

"We're a trap for the princess," Yakume explained. "I don't know how, I don't know what the general expects to gain - but we are. Somehow. He's an honorable man, and he and Prince Zuko gave their word... but I *know* the general. If he turned us loose, he expects to gain an advantage from it." He swept his gaze over the sailors. "Which is why we are not going back to the palace, or even the city. Not yet. Princess Azula is General Iroh's enemy, and I will not bring danger to her doorstep."

Nervously, Koki and the others started edging away from each other.

"It's not that kind of a trap," Yakume said impatiently. "He's more subtle than that, believe me. It's not a weapon. It's not even a *person*." He glanced down, trying to recall everything he'd heard of every campaign the general had run. "He let us go to tell the princess what we've seen. Something in that information *must* be dangerous."

"Try all of it, temper like she's got," Lu-shan said dryly. "Dangerous to any poor bastard in reach, anyway."

Yakume felt as much as saw the others jump at the term, and held up a staying hand. "It doesn't mean the same here," he said stiffly. "And the captain has a point. The Dragon of the West may be known for his application of force and mass, but he also knows the value of a well-timed distraction."

Which might be all General Iroh intended. Possibly. *If only I could sort out what I do know*. "You say the prince is cursed?" Yakume eyed Sergeant Aoi.

"Like I told you. A waterbender." The burly sergeant shuddered. "Agni, that's just not *right*."

"Hot water," Lu-shan snorted.

Aoi glared at him. "He froze the damn spirit in *ice*."

Which seemed irrefutable evidence. And yet... "The general said Prince Zuko was a fire-healer," Yakume began.

"Jee talked about fire-healing, too," Aoi growled. "He must've been talking about the general. It was the *traitor* who was sick on shore. And we all saw the ice."

"And the general agreed with you that-" Yakume winced, and almost slapped himself in the forehead. "No, he *implied* the prince was cursed. He never *said* it." The Moon had set her hand on the prince, indeed. Firebender cursed to waterbender, warping his spirit awry? That would make everything make sense.

Except it didn't. The Dai Li had been *sure*.

"Waterbending is a curse?" Lu-shan eyed them all.

Yakume shrugged. "How would you feel about a Guard who bent fire?"

"...Point." Lu-shan sighed like a far-off volcano's rumble. Glanced toward yet another sailor

straying toward the guardrail, and raised a grizzled brow at Aoi.

"Norimichi!" the sergeant growled. "Agni's flames, man, you can stare like a backwater rube later."

"Um, Sergeant?" Still leaning over the railing, Norimichi rubbed his eyes. "Aren't people supposed to ride *inside* those things?"

Yakume found himself crushed up against the guardrail with the others, half expecting to just see something odd decorating one of the four or five-car trains he'd almost gotten used to seeing-

It was long. Very long. And moving fast, flames blazing and battering at each other as figures in red and pink and green fought on rooftops for their lives. Orange flames... and fierce, lethal blue.

"Oma and Shu, the earthbenders are crazy!" Lu-shan swore.

The earthbenders? Yakume thought. Tore his gaze away just long enough to give the Guard a disbelieving glance.

"Nobody pushes a train that fast!" Lu-shan snarled, as the train screamed along the rails toward the station, figures growing larger with stunning speed. "Even if they start braking now, they'll overshoot us by a mile!"

Yakume stared at the desperate fight. And the length of the train. And the blurs of green, now resolved into Dai Li uniforms-

Only one of the Dai Li was shorter. Leaner. And parried a blast of fire with a slash of his hand.

Yakume made himself breathe, hearing the crackle of flames in the wind. "They're not going to stop."

"Are you crazy?" Lu-shan was staring wide-eyed at the oncoming juggernaut of wood and stone. "Trains *always* stop-"

The train howled past, an endless stretch of windows and frightened faces and fire.

Bemused, Yakume waved. Especially at the first car, where a pair of earthbenders who looked like father and son were bending the train faster in a distinctly nonstandard fashion. And where light glinted off knives a gold-eyed girl held ready to throw at any who might block their way.

Endless heartbeats later, they were gone.

Staring down the tracks after them, Yakume shook himself. Glanced at Lu-shan, who stood frozen, mouth gaping. "I take it you saw Guard Huojin?"

Speechless, Lu-shan stared at him.

"That's what I thought," Yakume murmured. And had to shake his head in disbelief, wanting to laugh at the sheer audacity of it... and rage, that such wild brilliance blazed for the other side. "Iroh's heir, in all but birth."

"I- but- he-!" Giving up, Lu-shan flung up his hands.

"He was born of the line of Sozin, and he will die of the line of Sozin," Yakume said, trying to keep his voice steady. "Spirits. They burn so brightly."

"You *want* to get in the middle of *that*?" Lu-shan sputtered.

"They are great names." Yakume heard the longing in his own voice, and didn't try to dampen it. "Who would not want to follow?" Sighing, he turned toward a very pale Aoi. "I suppose we can stop waiting here... what is it?"

"They're heading toward the harbor," Aoi said, shaken.

Frowning, Yakume nodded.

Aoi shook his head, speaking as if to a new, slow recruit. "They're heading toward the *water*."

...Oh.

Too slow, Zuko thought. Has to be a feint.

It wasn't.

No time to block Azula's fire-wheel; he slapped it aside with hot sand, bits of earth guzzling heat like a tavern full of thirsty marines. Molten glass snaked out and slashed at his will; he smelled her hair burning, before wind whipped smoke away.

I don't even have to heat it, Zuko thought wryly, in a brief instant she had to deal with Shirong flinging chains. She's doing that for me.

Which was the only thing that wasn't confusing about this fight. He was fighting *Azula*. He ought to be either scared stiff or white-blind with rage. And - he wasn't.

Worried, yes. Desperate to keep her pressed as far back on the train as he could, away from innocent civilians. If the train sped up, and Shirong could cut a car she was on loose...

But most of all, he was wrapped in a haze of manic glee. Here was an enemy. Here was someone just as deep in the whole Roku-Ilah-Sozin mess as he was. Who carried as much guilt, in the eyes of the world; whose blood every other nation would say was just as torn between good and evil...

As if Sozin was just evil. And Roku was just good.

Katara would say his sister was evil. Toph probably would. Heck, even *Aang* would.

And you don't get it, you don't get it at all. She believes in the Fire Lord. Just like you believe in Gyatso, Aang. That's why she killed you. That's why she'll kill you again.

And he could fight Azula and still *think*. It didn't make sense- wait, what was she-

Training said *spinning flame kick*. A deeper whisper said *yes, covering line-of-sight, look out for the-*

The fire-charged punch blasted through his flame wall, and he was flying.

Lee!

Thank Guanyin for training, and practicing until he wanted to just fall over and die. Shirong knew exactly how to fling rock gloves to seize and yank a body back to safe ground. Even if that ground was the top of another train car.

He's down, look out for-

Blue flame seared his shoulder; the world went red and black.

It's just pain, damn it!

Shirong stepped into the blow, seeing her smirk, knowing he was out of rock and placed wrong to fling chains.

Never fought drained of chi, have you?

He drove a punch home like a mine hammer, impacting an area cold experience had taught him would drop a woman fast as a groin-shot in men.

She dodged. Most of it.

Shirong saw her pale with pain as she skidded backward, one arm instinctively raised to shield her breast. Then flush with rage, slashing fire with kicks and sweeps to drive him back and *kill* him.

In that instant, he could see a lifetime.

Noble. Prodigy. Taught by the best. Trained by the best. Always, always the favored, chosen heir.

No one would have dared fight dirty training you, would they?

You're not like your brother, Azula. You never could be.

Though Zuko wasn't quite fighting like himself either. And it wasn't just bending fire instead of water.

He's got the skill to take her, he just doesn't think he can. Second-guessing himself. Damn it, Lee, she's not better than you-

Blue fire surged at him-

Yanked aside, so close his eyes teared, caught in a globe of orange flame.

Stop thinking. Just fight!

It didn't make sense that he could see Azula's moves coming. It didn't make sense that he knew - *knew* - what a mountain firebender would expect as a reply, and counter it like waves against cliffs. Just didn't make sense...

But the world had stopped making sense at the South Pole. He was getting used to it.

She's good, something in his mind murmured. Not with the fear he should have felt. Simply... accepting. *She's very, very good.*

But she's young.

Young enough to get caught in the fury of the quick kill, the utter destruction of her enemies. To believe that if someone didn't kill her, it was because they *couldn't*.

I could kill her. If I were willing to risk both of us dying.

But there was a better way.

Steel lanced through the charred roof, and he grinned.

I'm going to kill him, Azula thought grimly, dodging spearheads as they punched through. *Quickly, and thoroughly. This time, I'm going to be sure.*

Zuko was avoiding steel just as easily as she was, damn him. Because he was keeping an eye on his surroundings as well. Instead of just on her.

How dare you!

She was the best. The *best*. Sparring with her brother was supposed to be a laugh, a lark; a way to spit defiance in Ursa's eye, by showing her ghost how pathetic the child she'd chosen really was.

Only Zuko was holding her at bay. And making it look *easy*.

If you didn't have that Dai Li covering you...

But he did. And if Shirong didn't seem to be skilled at moving any hunk of stone bigger than his gloves, the agent was more than happy to take apart the whole car under them for ammunition, bit by painful bit.

She could wear them both down. She could *hurt* them. But she couldn't drive them farther.

And if Shirong could cut away enough bits of stone to shear off a car with her and Ty Lee still on it-

No. He won't.

You didn't bring allies to the field, Zuzu. You brought liabilities.

I know your weakness.

Leap and land and *slam* fire through the roof-

Oh, what lovely screams.

"Out!" Huojin roared, making himself heard over the panic and roar of flames. The stench of seared flesh and vomit swirled through the air, seized at his stomach; he swallowed hard, and tried not to feel. "Everyone move *forward!*"

They moved. Except for three unlucky bastards who'd never be moving again.

The kids are all forward, the Guard told himself harshly; hauling out one truly unlucky bastard who was still breathing, and never mind the charred skin tearing off on charcoaled wood seats. Amaya could save him, or she couldn't. *My girls are forward, with Teruko...*

And he wanted to scream because Teruko wasn't here. Because she was following orders, following the plan, and sticking with the cars of women and children. A living firedamp, ready to keep what had happened here from happening *there*.

If they lived through this, Huojin was going to take all the nightmares he knew this day would give him. Take them, and be *grateful*. Because his girls were *safe*.

Teruko, Huojin thought grimly, letting the sliding door tear in the wind as he dragged his moaning burden through the gale between the cars. Other hands reached out, pulling him up. *Jia and the other earthbenders to keep the tracks intact if anyone messes with them. Amaya.*

Zuko had arrayed benders like living walls, making the cars full of civilians a moving fortress. Deliberately setting the less crucial supply cars last, so if worst came to worst and he and Shirong were killed, earthbenders could cut the train by a third; a mole-skink shedding its tail to survive.

Overkill, Huojin had thought when they'd set it up. Had to be. He'd heard about Zuko's sister, but he hadn't *believed* it. Sure, Fire Nation soldiers could be horrid, and evil, and slaughter civilians without blinking an eye... but a fourteen-year-old girl?

But you knew, kid. You knew.

And now instead of laughing at the kid for being paranoid, he was desperately praying Zuko had been paranoid *enough*.

Don't die out there, do you hear me? Don't die.

Not my people!

Zuko swept a wave of fire at her; punched a flurry of fireballs. Saw Azula smirk, and hated it. And hated himself.

I should have known. I should have known.

Azula always got what she wanted. And what she wanted was his *attention*.

People dying to get it was just sprinkles on the top.

Charred wood gave way under his feet; he leapt as it collapsed, touching down on the roof of the next car and lashing out with a whip of flame to cover Shirong's jump.

Azula dodged it. Of course. But it kept her busy as she landed, just long enough for Shirong to carve out a bit more ammunition.

It kept them busy too; Ty Lee's somersault between the cars wasn't up to her usual grace, but she landed in one piece, twisting Shirong's last chains loose and sending them spinning away. Gray eyes still wide; hands limp, not forming the deadly fists that would punch a foe into paralysis. But still here, drawn in Azula's wake like a leaf in the current.

Leaves burn, Ty Lee.

It was a fight between us, Azula. I thought you had enough honor to hold to that!

But when had she? When had she ever?

You're my sister...

Shutting his ears to the wail of his spirit, Zuko regarded his enemy.

Steady. Breathe, murmured that deep whisper. *The world itself is your weapon.*

Everything burns.

Firestorm.

Shirong had heard the word from the firefighters of Ba Sing Se, sooty and mourning their dead

with hard liquor and harder grief. The devastation of lives and tenements; the howling monster that devoured flesh and wood and even stone, shattering rock like glass. Sometimes there were evil spirits responsible; those were the nightmares that had cost him two partners in as many years, before he'd finally demanded solo assignments. But most of the time, there was only fire.

There's no such thing, Shirong thought, dazed, *as only fire*.

He was caught in the heartbeats of raging dragons, savaging roof and wind and anything between. Blue flames that roared of pain and lingering death and *failure, you've lost, and you'll burn for it-*

Orange fire leapt, curled, twisted; never the same twice. No challenges. No threats. It simply *was*, as if some angry spirit of iron had hammered lava into mist and moonlight.

Even seared and aching, Shirong could not fear it. It belonged. Just as the breath in his lungs, the stone in his hands-

Smirking, Shirong crushed stone to powdered sand, and hurled it into the fray.

Zuko is alive, Ty Lee thought numbly. *Zuko can't be alive*.

The two facts chased each other through Ty Lee's brain like angry lemurs as the fight and flames moved over and around her. Azula was stronger than her brother. Ty Lee knew it. Her clan elders knew it. The Fire Lord knew it.

But Zuko was *alive*. Which meant he'd betrayed the Fire Lord and *survived*.

Her elders said only two firebenders in this century had ever pulled that off. And if Zuko had the strength of Jeong Jeong the Deserter...

Or the Great Betrayer.

She wouldn't think his name. She wouldn't honor the ghost of that *creature* that had stolen so many of her own kin, a century ago. Stolen them away like the smoke from a pyre; gone, *gone*, and he hadn't even offered crumbs of truth to those sent to gently question him...

Only slaughtered them, without mercy.

It wasn't right to wish anyone dead, but when her family had told her the bedside tales, she'd always been glad he was.

So she'd never forgotten whose granddaughter Lady Ursa was. Even if Azula acted like she didn't know.

Azula is born of those who bring death to Tengri's blood. On both sides, the elders said. *Serve her, that we all may live*.

Of course, Zuko was too. But he'd never acted like it. Clumsy, shy; always ten steps behind his prodigy of a sister.

The firebending slicing around her wasn't clumsy now. Wasn't like anything Ty Lee had ever seen, as Zuko swirled glowing-hot sand between them to absorb yet another blast of blue fire. He wasn't sweating. He wasn't panicked. He wasn't even breathing hard.

Breath is chi, and chi is fire, her frozen mind whispered. *How can he make fire without breathing?*

A deceptively gentle swirl of his hand snaked flames from burning wood to slash at Azula's shins-

Azula parted it with a stomp that roared a backfire in his face-

Zuko spun and leapt, sand spiraling with him to catch flames and glow, spinning the rest of the blow off and away-

He's not making fire, Ty Lee realized. He's letting her make it!

Like the Betrayer. Like Byakko, who still hunted her clan if they dared to sail an inch across waters that treacherous island claimed as their own. She'd never caught Lady Ursa teaching the prince that perversion of firebending, but somehow Ursa *must* have...

He wasn't fighting to kill because he didn't have to! If he outlasts her-

He can't!

If Zuko were stronger, he should be the heir. But he wasn't, he couldn't be; he was a traitor to the Fire Lord, and if her people followed him they would die. They would *die*, and Tengri's ways would be *gone*. And he was twice a traitor, he wasn't even fighting to *be* heir, not if he'd tried to sneak in and out of Ba Sing Se without ever facing Azula-

And how could he not want to face Azula? How? How could he betray Ty Lee, betray all her people, by finding his strength *now*, when it was worse than useless? How could he screw up, the way Zuko *always* screwed up, and leave her people with no choice but to follow Azula? Because even if Zuko was stronger...

He can't be!

Even if he was, he was *alone*. Against the Fire Lord's armies. Anyone who stood with him was going to *die*.

No, no, Zuko wouldn't do that! He can't be doing this! He-

Ty Lee didn't have the breath to shout a warning, as the train shot through a tunnel in the Wall. But then, this was Azula. She didn't need to.

Yet Ty Lee had to duck again as they roared out of the darkness, as boulders flung by soldiers on the Wall crashed down on them all. And even from here, she could see Shirong's face light with fierce glee, as he seized hold of flung stone and punched it at Azula in an explosion of knife-sharp shards.

They'll kill her.

They're standing in the Fire Lord's way.

Everyone on Suzuran, everyone on this train... Zuko's going to kill them all.

I won't let you-!

The train's gale howled about her, and Ty Lee *moved*.

"There are many reasons Sozin attacked the Air Nomads before the Earth Kingdom," Uncle had said once, on *Wani's* deck. "If you would capture the Avatar alive, we *must* take him before he masters earth. The union of opposites can be unstoppable."

There wasn't time to duck. There wasn't time to plan. There was only an instant to *move*, hope no one was left in the car under them, and pray he could block enough of the shards.

Dragon Chases the Moon.

Fire surged from the burning roof; swirling vortices that didn't so much block the deadly shrapnel as catch and whirl it aside-

Most of it.

Oh fu-

Pain.

When you can smell blood, you're having a bad day.

Flat on his face, one hand gripping the charred wood of the roof, Shirong clamped a rock glove onto the semiconscious firebender's arm. Worked at his fingertips, until rock flowed and locked Zuko to the roof beside him, holding against the train's wind.

Best I can do, right now.

He didn't look at the blackened blades of stone that had stabbed through Zuko's last defense, or the smaller splinters piercing his own flesh. They were hurt. It wasn't good. But if he didn't stop Ty Lee *now*, they'd both be dead.

Oh, lovely. Stop her, when we're surrounded by wind? How?

But the acrobat - the *airbender* - didn't finish them. Just stood there, pale as parchment. Shuddered, and turned to help Azula-

Who'd already regained her feet, with a gymnast's twist that made it look *easy*. And a quizzical, calculating expression. "Why?"

"You're my friend," Ty Lee said simply. "And you're smarter than Fire Lord Sozin and Azulon. They hunted my people. You take care of us."

Soul chilled, Shirong tried to match the innocent smile to the words just spoken. And couldn't.

Our innocent bookworm Kuei gave up Earth Kingdom territory to the Fire Nation. To buffer us from this.

If we live, every Dai Li owes him an apology.

If. Oma and Shu. He was bleeding from a dozen small wounds, Zuko wasn't moving, Ty Lee was an *airbender* with all the train's gale to grab, and Azula was smiling at him in a way that made his spirit want to crawl right out of his flesh.

If I throw the shards back, it will only blind them for an instant. And she's waiting for that. I can feel it.

No, Shirong realized, as Zuko made a choked noise and Azula's lips turned up in a smirk. She wasn't waiting for the agent to move, any more than a man waited for a mosquito-flea he intended to squash.

She's waiting for him to die.

Spirits. And he didn't have so much as a link of chain left. Though he could see one of his chains, caught around a burning rafter yards away; flames wavering the air above it, clinks mocking him as it swung, so painfully out of reach.

"Mother coddled you, but Father *respects* me," Azula stated, acid amusement in her voice. "I'm going to enjoy being an only child."

Shirong snarled. *I'd like to see you breathe molten glass, you little-*

Anger blocked the roaring wind from his ears. All he could hear was Zuko's gasping breath... and a jingle of chain.

Metal is earth. Heat is fire.

He rolled to his knees, and *pulled*.

Searing chain whipped around legs like strangle-vines, tearing girls from the roof with a scream.

...Ow.

Collapsing on the roof felt like the best idea in the world. If only everything would just go away and let him *hurt*.

But he'd fought spirits that struck with pain and sleep and pure boredom before. Discipline said you didn't lie down and die until you were *sure* the enemy was dead.

Gathering himself, he looked over the side of the train.

...Not. Possible.

They weren't *on* the train, thanks be for small favors. But there was a familiar red-and-pink lump clinging to one of the track's stone support pylons.

Even with the train racing away, Shirong felt that gold-eyed rage like a fireball.

"Guanyin, mother of mercy, forgive me," he whispered. "What does it take to *kill* that girl?"

"More than anybody's got so far," Zuko rasped, pulling in threads of green flame to staunch the worst bleeding. "Help me up."

"Stay still!" Shirong snapped. Spirits, the speed they were moving - and the harbor was so *close*... "You get up while the train's stopping, I'll lose you for real this time."

"Look at the docks."

The docks? The whole harbor was on fire, what was he supposed to be-

The docks were on fire. So were the ships. Except for red sails already fleeing into the lake... and *Suzuran*, holding at trebuchet range from shore, lobbing flaming tar at any group of soldiers that seemed to be getting organized.

"They left us," Shirong realized, too stunned to even be angry as their train screamed down the rails' ramp toward the shore. "Oh, Oma and Shu. They *left* us."

"Think!" Zuko hissed, working out one of the smaller shards. "Earthbenders! I swear water shuts off your brain. We're not stopping this train!"

"Geh?" Shirong managed. Because that was *water*, deep and deadly and just waiting to suck down an unwary earthbender and *drown him*. "Lee. Us. Sink." *Oh spirits, here it comes-*

"Help me up!"

Command, with nothing of fear in it. Shirong moved, as the train left the rails entirely, crunching over flaming guardrails, wood and stone shrieking into spraying waves.

Standing, Zuko spread his hands, left foot stepping forward and out. Brought his hands together, shifting his weight back and spreading hands out with a tattered breath.

Waves surged forward to seize the train, foaming past windows, rousing screams-

Zuko drew his hands back to center, and *pushed*.

Waves crackled into ice, a curved arrowhead sheet of it spreading from the train's sides, buoying them into the harbor with all the speed and grace of a terrified flatfish.

"We get out of this," Zuko coughed, slumping against him like a summer-wilted weed, "I'm going to teach you about *displacement*."

Tucked into a niche Agents Quan and Bon had carved out a remnant of the Outer Wall, heart beating like sparrowkeet wings, Kuei watched the ice-winged train slide into the harbor with a thunderous splash. And tried not to fall off the Wall. *That- he-*

He'd been guarded inside, so he hadn't seen the Avatar and his friends attack the palace. He wondered if it would have felt like this.

No, Kuei decided, awed and terrified at once. Aang had come like an unstoppable storm, even if he'd meant to be friendly. Twelve-year-old boy or not, he was the *Avatar*. Who could fight the spirit of the whole world?

This wasn't a spirit's work. This was a desperate, human effort, backed by skill and sheer, bloody-minded audacity.

This is something we could do, Kuei realized. *If we dare. Or - well, not this, we don't have any waterbenders right now, but- Oma and Shu. He's right. We can fight for the world. We will.*

As Zuko was. And it was *working*. The train wasn't seaworthy. He could see cars listing, and the fires raging on the docks were pouring out enough heat to melt a dozen icebergs. But it *was* floating. *Suzuran* was already throwing lines to the passengers, pulling the train close enough for earthbenders to break off sections of car walls and lift stone, supplies, and refugees to the steel deck.

It wasn't smooth. It wasn't pretty. But it was fast, and determined, and-

"I don't believe it," Bon breathed beside him, staring. "They're towing it!"

"They have to," Kuei realized, a dozen bits of books about ships coming together in his head in the face of reality. "*Suzuran* may look big next to our junks, but she's one of the Fire Navy's smaller supply ships. If they tried to take everyone on board, they'd capsize." He shaded his eyes. "There.

They're catching up to the ferries." He couldn't keep a note of wistfulness out of his voice. Everything was blurred by smoke and distance; if only he could see more.

Something rounded and metal tapped him on the arm. Kuei glanced at the telescope, then at Quan's wry, faint smile. "Oh. Thank you."

"Say what you like about the Fire Nation, they do make good lenses," Quan said dryly. "I suppose firebending can be good for something."

"Yes, it is," Kuei murmured, peering through the spyglass at the dangerous dance of steel and wood and ice. Remembering another impossible, audacious plan, embodied in the drill that had punched through Ba Sing Se's Outer Wall, stopped only by the Avatar.

He watched lives snatched out of the water for a few minutes more; sighed, and handed the telescope to Bon, peering at the flames and ash that had been his city's harbor. "I didn't know destruction could be so beautiful."

"Sir-"

"I know. It's horrible," Kuei said soberly. "I wish it'd never had to happen. But there's a certain... stark simplicity in it. Like fine calligraphy." Where every stroke *meant* something. And the true artist used just what was needed, and not one drop of ink more. "Look at it, Agent Quan." He gestured toward the smoke-hazed shore, where red-armored soldiers were beginning to get the blazes under control. "Prince Zuko decided to evacuate his people, and he did. Princess Azula decided to break our wall, and she did. General Iroh decided to invade our city years ago, and he did." Kuei shook his head, and looked at his chief Dai Li. "Fire Lord Ozai has decided to take the Earth Kingdom, hasn't he?"

"Yes, sir," Quan said quietly, face sober.

Kuei shivered, but tried to swallow the lump in his throat. "Can we stop him?"

"I don't know, your majesty," Quan said simply. "But for our people, for the world... we have to try." He let out a slow, measured breath. "Though I like our chances a lot better now than I did yesterday." He gestured over the harbor. "I'm not a military man, but even I can see Fire Lord Ozai is going to have some interesting choices to make. Reinforce his army here, and tighten his grip on Ba Sing Se? Send forces after Prince Zuko? Or both?" The agent's smile was thin, a razor of dark glee. "And if he does send forces after the prince, how many of them is he prepared to lose?"

"I hate hoping for death," Kuei said bleakly. "Even those of our enemies."

"I said *lose*, your majesty. I wasn't thinking of death."

"I don't understand," Kuei admitted.

"An earthbender who breaks his deals can die," Quan said, pointing out the painfully obvious. "So can any of the Fire Nation who break their loyalties; and except for that mad hermit Jeong Jeong, firebenders *always* die." He paused. "I should have died, your majesty. I didn't. Because you and *earth-healers* brought me back."

And Lee... Zuko was a healer. A *fire*-healer.

Still, how did that change anything? Nobles ruled; commoners followed. That was the way of the world. Even the Avatar had allied himself with the nobility of the Southern Water Tribe; young Katara might think Long Feng had kept him in the dark about reality, and when it came to the war,

she was right. But the Dai Li's leader certainly hadn't shirked his duties when it came to keeping the Earth Kingdom up to date on details of inheritance and succession!

Granted, Lady Bei Fong might come of a somewhat mercantile background. But her title was proper enough. Even if her behavior was a bit... *eccentric*.

So the Avatar and his nobles meant to lead the world against the Fire Nation. Of *course* the commoners of the world would follow.

None of which should have anything to do with Prince Zuko. Certainly, he could try to make a claim on commoners of his own nation, but he was an *exile*. Those in the Fire Lord's army, by definition, weren't. "I'm still confused, Agent Quan," Kuei admitted. "You seem to be implying that... that Fire Nation forces sent against Prince Zuko could disobey orders."

"Oh, yes," Quan nodded. "Disobey, and desert. Probably not the generals, but the lower officers? Yes. Some might."

"Officers?" Kuei protested, disbelieving. "Those of noble blood are *chosen* to lead. Those who aren't, *must* follow. It's tradition!"

"In the Earth Kingdom, sir," Bon spoke up. "From what I've heard Agent Shirong say, the Fire Nation is different. They have," he paused, and pronounced the words carefully, "*promotion on merit*."

"What in Guanyin's name does that mean?" Kuei murmured.

"It's something like the practice among the Dai Li," Bon said cautiously. "If you do your job well, you get a position with more responsibility." He hesitated. "Unless you're as bad off as Agent Shirong, and just too dangerous to put in charge of a team. Which isn't his fault, sir. Long Feng was brilliant to put him as a recruiter. He got to use his skills, and candidates always got a brush with kamuiy malice to test them. Usually, a survivable one."

"Usually?" Kuei said warily. Eyed Bon, trying to focus on what was important. "Agent, if you follow that logic, a *commoner* could end up an officer!"

Bon froze.

After a moment, Quan cleared his throat. "Your majesty. Up until he retired a decade or so ago... Colonel Piandao, one of Azulon's most frightening swordsmen? He not only wasn't a noble, he wasn't even a firebender."

Kuei blinked. Polished his glasses on his sleeve, and peered at Quan. "That speech of Zuko's. He implied they could choose to stay-"

"No, sir," Quan said firmly. "He said they could choose to follow you. Honorably. Or follow him."

"You mean... commoners can *choose* their nobles?" Kuei shook his head, dazed. *You mean I'm going to keep them?* He'd thought those left behind just didn't want to take the risks of the Fire Prince's plan, never mind Zuko's polite, shocking speech. After all, there were a *lot* of risks. "That's - that's chaos! People are the land. Land doesn't get up and move to follow one lord. Not when he's not even an earthbender! How could any noble sit still and make arrangements with his fellow lords when part of his own demesne is trying to go somewhere else... *oh*." Kuei leaned against the inside of the stone hollow, eyes wide, feeling the world tilt askew. "They don't sit still, do they? He said they need to fight. If your commoners can just - just *leave*... Oma and Shu. How could they ever *stop* fighting?"

"If Madame Wen's story is true," Bon put in carefully, "Avatar Kyoshi made them stop."

Kuei swallowed. Added that to what Zuko had said, and tried to picture what the Earth Kingdom might be like, had Avatar Roku leveled every fortress city and flatly forbidden them to rise again.

Guanyin have mercy. We'd slaughter each other.

Still. Roku hadn't, and it was the Fire Nation trying to slaughter them instead, and- oh. "He's not just a distraction for Azula, is he?" Kuei said, feeling his way around the edges of a truly shocking idea. "Spirits. He could fracture the Fire Lord's whole invasion!"

"I doubt that, your majesty," Quan said frankly. "Fire Lord Ozai picks his generals. And while Fire Nation troops may not believe in nobles, they are loyal to command. It will be a rare person who risks damaging that loyalty, even if they know the prince is a fire-healer. But for the first time in what the Wens tell us is centuries, they'll know disobeying is *possible*." Another edged smile touched his face. "The Fire Lord is used to the unbreakable loyalty of his soldiers. It's what makes their conquest so deadly. And now... now that loyalty may not be unbreakable after all." He laughed softly. "Take it from a Dai Li, sir. A threat can be even better than a sword."

"That's why you didn't speak against my arrangement with Prince Zuko," Kuei realized. "You knew, just by being out there, they'd help us." He muttered something *very* unkingly under his breath. "Quan, you have to tell me these things!"

"There wasn't time-" Quan caught himself, and bowed with a sigh. "Forgive me, your majesty. We'll find a way to make time." He swept a glance across the ground below, looking for patches of familiar Dai Li green. "But could we do that underground, sir?"

With a last look at dying fires, Kuei nodded, blinking at the darkness as Bon sealed their hiding place, and then again at the dim green light as Bon opened a tunnel to the stairs leading down. "So how will Prince Zuko's plan affect the Avatar's invasion?"

"I don't know, sir." Quan frowned. "It would help if I knew the plan's specifics."

Kuei felt a queasy uncertainty as they reached the stairs; Bon leading, Quan taking up the rear guard. "You don't know?"

Quan stopped on the topmost stair. "*You* don't know."

"Well... no," Kuei admitted. "Sokka came up with the idea, and the Council of Five sent word they were about to finish it, before Princess Azula- oh no." He swallowed dryly. "Oh, I... really feel like an idiot. She knows. About the eclipse," he added at Quan's sharp look. "They hadn't finished the plan when I... told the head of the Kyoshi Warriors."

"Ah," Quan said levelly.

"An eclipse?" Bon looked up at them both, incredulous. "You mean they're *real*?"

"The sun darkens, and day turns to night," Quan told him. "Only I've heard it's even worse for firebenders. They'll be powerless. Even if the Avatar hasn't mastered all the elements, he should have no problem defeating the Fire Lord."

"Exactly!" Kuei beamed. And frowned, still worried. "Though I don't know how they were going to get to the Fire Lord and still give the Avatar eight minutes to beat him."

"Eight minutes?" Quan repeated carefully.

"The eclipse," Kuei reminded him. Glanced between the agents, as their amazement turned to dread. "I know the sun is partly shadowed for a few hours, but it's only *dark* for... oh no." He felt faint. "Is this one of those things most people don't know about?"

...Was Bon banging his head against the wall?

"Well," Quan sighed, "if the generals did solve that problem, hopefully the answer was in those plans Katara was going to take to you, your majesty."

"So you don't know?" A chill went down Kuei's spine. "I thought part of our plan last night was to get as much as we could of the army loose."

"And we did, sir." Lifting his head from the dent, Bon grimaced. "Princess Azula beat us to them. The survivors say the Council of Five has either been executed, or deported to Fire Nation territory." He paused. "They're gone, sir."

Kuei winced. He hadn't really *liked* the generals, the few times he'd met them. They seemed to assume he didn't know anything.

...And yes, that was partly true, but how could he fix that if they wouldn't explain what they were doing? And why?

But he hadn't liked them, and that made him feel even worse. Because he had to put their deaths aside, and focus on what he could do for those still alive. "So we have no idea what the Avatar's plan is."

"No, sir," Quan agreed, obviously unhappy. Clenched his fists at his side, and reluctantly forced the next words out. "But we know when it comes to strategy and treachery, the Fire Princess has them all outmatched."

"Except when she gets hit by a train," Bon said dryly.

Quan snorted. "Right. Like we can... sir?"

Absently tapping the jade beads hidden under his cloak, Kuei thought about that. And, slowly, smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Tai Chi moves for the train escape - Scooping the Sea while Looking at the Sky, and Pushing Wave.

Yes, I enjoyed *Speed* and *Under Siege 2*. How'd you guess?

Seriously, ever since I looked at the Avatar world map and saw how fast the Gaang got into the city by train, I've been hoping someone would write a Traintop Battle in Ba Sing Se.

"Cloth washed in fire" - ancient China (and some other areas) made some clothing out of asbestos. Given we see Earth Kingdom soldiers ducking to take flames on that wide hat of theirs, I offer that as a potential explanation for canon.

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

We need a better plan. Leaning away from the boulder behind him, Sokka looked at the little island-marks he'd scrawled in the dirt, now half-obsured by sunset's shadows. Sighed, and knuckled his eyebrow to rub at a gnawing headache. *We need a different plan, anyway. Don't know if we need a better one.*

Then again, just about any plan might be better than just charging into the Fire Nation blind. They didn't have the Earth King's troops behind them. What they did have, or could get - it'd have to count.

And it won't, if I don't figure out where to aim it. Darn it, we need information...

Like they had in Ba Sing Se. And they all knew what had happened when they'd relied on *other people* to tell them about the city.

Aang died. Really died. We all almost died.

We can't do that again. If we're dead, nobody can stop the Fire Lord.

We need to know what we're up against. And... I don't think we can do that from outside the Fire Nation.

Which was the same conclusion he'd circled back to for the past three days, and Sokka muttered words under his breath that would have Gran-Gran washing his mouth out with soap.

We need to get in there. And Zuko gave us a way.

If they could trust the firebender. The exiled, lousy, sister-scaring bastard...

Don't lie, Sokka told himself harshly. It's not Zuko you're worried about.

If they took Zuko up on his offer, Katara would be playing the part of a girl hunting her mother's killer. And... he was really worried... it wouldn't be *playing*.

Tui and La. He didn't want to think about if they could trust *Katara*.

Damn it...

"What'cha drawing?"

Sokka didn't look up, even when bare toes stepped into his line of sight, carefully avoiding each scribble. "The Fire Nation. I'm trying to, anyway. The Earth Generals had a big map of it. I think this is what it looked like. Aang's working with Katara again?"

"Trying to figure out how to freeze a wave without freezing somebody's head inside it," Toph confirmed.

"Good luck with that," Sokka grumbled. "Sooner or later, he's got to figure out... well. He'd better figure out something to do with the Fire Lord. I don't think talking him out of conquering the world is going to work."

"Me neither," Toph agreed. "But it's still a good idea. Twinkletoes has big and flashy down pat. Figuring out how to fiddle with the little things in a move - he needs a lot of work on that. If he wants to do it with water instead of earth, 'cause he gets to drool at your sister? Fine. Just as long as he does it."

For once, the Fire Nation took a sharp right out of his mind, only hanging around to giggle maniacally. "He's what?" Sokka yelped.

"Relax," Toph shrugged, waving a hand back and forth. "He's drooling, but she's cooled it down a lot. Xiu must have made her think. Good for her. Aang doesn't have any parents to check on her family. He doesn't have *anybody*. It's not fair to get him into something that might not be a good idea."

"Hey! How can being my sister's boyfriend *not* be a good idea!" Sokka protested. Stopped, and buried his head in his hands. "Argh. Brain... broken..."

Snickering, Toph sat down by him. "Sometimes I wish I had a big brother. It'd be neat if he were a lot like you." She punched him in the arm. "Though I can take care of myself."

"What, and you think the master waterbender can't?" Sokka grumbled.

"She's too busy taking care of the rest of us," Toph said seriously. "Katara keeps us together. You keep us focused." She paused. "And Aang takes a lot of focus."

"Tell me about it," Sokka groaned. "I just... I don't get him sometimes. Make that a lot of the time." He bit his lip. "You know what I really hate about that mess at the library now? We spent all our time looking for ways to beat the Fire Nation. I just... I kind of wish we could go back and look up the Air Nomads."

Toph frowned, toes kneading dirt. "I knew it. We left you guys alone, and you got to do all your guy talk with no girls to toss some sense in, and now something's *bothering* you."

"It's not like- okay. It kind of is like that," Sokka sighed. "Every Air Nomad was a bender. All of them." He waved his hands, unable to describe the odd sinking feeling he'd had when he finally realized that. "I'm not even sure where to start asking Aang about... stuff."

"You want to know if all the Air Nomads thought they were blessed by spirits," Toph said bluntly. "Like Katara does."

Sokka picked up his jaw. "How'd you know?"

"Zuko told me about that." For once, Toph looked a little ashamed. "And after I talked about spirits some with Katara... I'm sorry. I didn't know I was stomping on your toes when I-" She stopped. Shook her head, and started over. "Bending's just *me*, Sokka. I use it the way you use Boomerang. When I bend to move you, I'm not trying to say I'm better than you. It's just the easiest way to do things when I'm mad."

Sokka started to shoot back a comment about cheap apologies... and stopped, as something a few months back finally clicked in his head. "Bato was with a bunch of nuns when he was hurt. But they weren't earthbenders."

"Yeah?" Toph cocked her head at him. "So why's that strange? My parents didn't say much about nuns. Just that it was a *calling*. Kind of like Aang getting stuck with the world, only a lot smaller."

"But if they're not benders, how do they talk to the spirits?" Sokka asked, puzzled. "I mean, most

of the time. When the spirits aren't mad and trying to kill people."

"I dunno," Toph shrugged. "What's bending got to do with talking to spirits? I've met lots of benders who never even *met* a spirit. I didn't, 'til I went with you guys."

It was a good thing he was already sitting down, Sokka thought. Because that was just... weird. "Aang talks to spirits," he pointed out.

"Yeah, but that's 'cause-" Toph shot to her feet, and kicked a line of dirt that rumbled under the boulder to roar up in a ring of earth. "Talk!"

Something stomped impatiently, rattling pebbles loose from inside the wall.

"Peace, little one," a hearty, elderly man's voice said gently. "The young lady has every right to be cautious." He cleared his throat. "As I believe she was about to say, young man, that is because Avatar Aang *is* a spirit. And a human, who embodies the Avatar Spirit, so it might better understand our world. A bridge, after all, must be part of both sides."

Sokka blinked at Toph. Who shrugged, and sank the wall back into the ground.

"Okay," Sokka said, stepping around the boulder to get a close view of the man. Middle-tall, straggly white hair and beard, a hooded cloak mottled in rock-colors over a plain brown robe, and timeworn fingers easily gripping a knobby wooden staff. "So who are you, and why are you looking for Aang?"

"I am Tao," the elderly man inclined his head. "A wanderer of these hills. At times a shaman, when there is need. And I was not looking for Avatar Aang, precisely." He waved a hand at a waft of dust in the setting sun, that swirled with a vigorous *stomp*. "Does this little one belong with you?"

"So it can be okay to name a spirit?" Aang breathed a sigh of relief as they gathered around the evening fire. Tao had apparently managed to talk to Boots as he traveled, somehow, and he'd brought enough dried noodles to cook for everyone. Best of all, he'd brought *tofu*.

No meat. Yay!

"Under certain circumstances," Tao agreed. "Which are, unfortunately, rare. It's not simply the act of naming, it is the emotions gifted with the name that a spirit takes to itself. Tui and La, Guanyin, Agni, the Autumn Lord of your own people; they were all great spirits to begin with, so the tales say. Their names were first spoken with reverence and awe, and that clings to them, no matter what has happened after." He shook his head slightly. "The lesser spirits, the *kamui*, are far more strongly affected. A hide-behind spirit, for example... well, normally those who encounter such creatures do feel fear, no matter how brave they may be. And that fear clings to any name, and leads the spirit to take the fear as *part* of itself. Which means they seek to inspire fear, over and over, for that is part of their essence." He waved toward the earthbender. "Toph was fortunate. She sensed a creature she did *not* fear, and named Boots accordingly." He leveled a stern finger across the fire. "You were lucky, young lady. Had this gone awry, you could have unleashed quite the little terror on the countryside. I'm certain the Avatar could have stopped it, but if he has not been trained in the proper handling of spirits... well. It'd be like using a stone mallet to swat a spider-fly. It does the job, but it's rather hard on everything else."

"Oh." For once, Toph looked taken aback. "So Boots went to find you?"

"That is what you asked of him." Tao smiled, a bit sadly. "I would say he was the best messenger you could have sent. There are too few of us who follow the shaman's path, these days."

"Because of the Fire Nation," Katara stated.

"Because of choice," Tao corrected her. "Though yes, the invasion does matter. It is easier to mute the call of the spirits when your village and family need defense in *this* world."

"How could you do that?" Katara asked, offering Momo a few nuts, before he fluttered back to Aang's shoulder. "It's an honor to be chosen by the spirits!"

"A lethal honor, should you happen to meet a kamui bent on malice whose strength is greater than your own," Tao said dryly. "With the world out of balance, that is happening more and more often. And while thirty years ago, if the need was dire, we could call on Ba Sing Se's Dai Li for aid... those who might still wish to aid us, have been influenced otherwise."

"Whoa, hold it." Sokka held up his hands. "The Dai Li helped you?"

"They are shamans, of a sort," Tao said wryly. "Not always of their own will. But they still battle evil within the city." He sighed. "Though if the tales are true, they have fallen into even greater evil. For one trained in dealing with spirits, human malice is ever an unexpected danger. Long Feng... well, you would know more of him than I."

Aang winced, trying not to think about the Dai Li who'd held Appa captive and worked with Azula. "So it's not just Koh? There are other evil spirits?"

Tao drew back, gauging him with a suddenly wary look. "You've dealt with the Face-Stealer."

"Well, I... kind of had to," Aang admitted, scratching his head. Darn it, maybe getting into the Fire Nation would be easier with hair, but he didn't like it *at all*. "Zhao was attacking the North Pole, and the Fire Nation was going to win, and - I *had* to. Avatar Roku said he was the only one who knew where to find the Moon and Ocean spirits..." He trailed off, seeing grim disappointment wash over Tao's face.

"Some rumors begin to be explained," the shaman sighed. "Is that what he said, young man? Is it exactly?"

Aang gulped. "Well... not *exactly*..."

Tao rubbed his head, the same way Sokka did these days. "Avatar Aang. This is one of the first things you should have been taught of spirits, and it is vital. The dead do not see the same world as the living. Especially those of the dead who remain in the spirit world, and do not visit us as ghosts still tied to mortal kin. And like any creature, the dead act on what they see."

"Roku wouldn't hurt Aang!" Katara protested. "He is Aang!"

"No, young lady," Tao said steadily. "If what I have been taught of the spirits is true, he is not." He regarded Aang, gaze level. "The Avatar Spirit is incarnated, life after life. Separate, human lives, each of whom claim their own spirit. Each of whom will in turn pass away, to join those who advise the next Avatar. You are many things, young man, but you are *not* Roku."

It hurt. Like diving into cold water without a breath to keep you warm first. "But I've been Roku," Aang objected. "And Kyoshi. And even Yangchen!"

"Any shaman can allow a spirit to possess him, so it may make its wishes more clear to humans," Tao stated. "It is not to be done casually, or without those around you who can bring you back if the spirit chooses not to leave. For while you are possessed, if the spirit is powerful, it can reshape even your mortal body as its own. If the spirit is malicious... shamans have died in monstrous form

before."

Wide-eyed, Aang started to back away-

Hit a solid wall of rock, as Toph frowned. "He's telling the truth." She swung a finger Tao's direction. "I don't know about Kyoshi, but Roku and Yangchen helped us."

"And I do not doubt they will do so again," Tao inclined his head. "They are Avatars, and I am sure they mean you no harm. But a man's intention may not be the same as his result. That is as true for the spirits as any of us."

"You think I can't trust Roku?" Aang said, disbelieving. "No way! You heard Toph; he's always helped us out!"

"That's not what he said," Sokka stated. "Remember the solstice? I bet Roku just meant to scare Zhao off, and take the temple down 'cause he was ticked off. Only he kind of forgot we still had to get *out* of the temple."

"If you believe Zuko," Katara said pointedly.

Sokka lowered his head, lips moving silently for a minute. "Katara. Either Roku brought it down on our heads by accident, or he did it on *purpose*."

"He wouldn't!"

"Then he did it by accident, and that's the *point*," Sokka almost snarled. "Us, alive. Able to be crushed by falling rocks. Roku, dead, kind of past worrying about it." He eyed Tao. "That what you're trying to get at?"

"In part," the shaman agreed. "The dead do not see the same dangers as the living. They can mean well, and still do great harm."

"But Roku's really, really wise!" Aang protested. "He wants to stop the war before the comet comes. He wouldn't get us hurt!" He looked toward an uneasy silence. "You know he doesn't want anyone to get hurt."

"Dad doesn't want anybody in the tribe to get hurt fighting the Fire Nation, either," Sokka said soberly. "Sometimes there isn't any choice. If you want to win, you have to send people where you know they're going to get hurt."

Aang swallowed hard. "But Roku's my *friend*." *Like Kuzon was.*

"Bato is Dad's friend." Katara's eyes were shadowed, hurting for him. "But the tribe, the world... it's more important than one person. More important than anyone. If Roku's trying to fix the whole world..." Her hands fisted in blue cloth, and she gazed at the fire. "Roku *is* your friend. And if the dead see things the living don't, I bet he knew we'd get out of there okay. But he's not your tribe. Not your family." She hesitated, picking her words. "He might not be as careful as he would be if you were."

It felt like getting hit in the stomach. "You think he's my friend, but I can't trust him?" Aang shook his head in disbelief. "Katara, that's crazy!"

"Crazy?" Katara sputtered. "Aang, he's *not* your tribe."

"You're not making any sense!"

"I'm not?" Katara's eye was twitching. "You - you -"

Toph wove her fingers together, cracking her knuckles. "Packed, over the side, gone."

Which made no sense. But Katara took a deep breath anyway, and smiled at Toph. "Thanks."

"Anytime." Toph faced his way. "I think we got another mix-up, Twinkletoes. Roku's like Gyatso, right? Older guy, helps you out, teaches you about what you're gonna be when you grow up?"

"Well, yeah," Aang admitted. Like she had to *say* that?

"I thought so." She faced toward Katara. "You're trying to tell him not to trust Gran-Gran."

"Oh." Katara looked like she'd swallowed a live catfish-eel.

"Even Gran-Gran can be wrong sometimes," Sokka pointed out. "Aang, if there's one thing I've figured out on this crazy adventure, it's that the world is really broken. I bet Roku sees a lot more than we do, but we can't count on him seeing everything. He told you to master the elements and defeat the Fire Lord. Okay. But he didn't tell you how. Maybe you're supposed to figure it out; part of all that Avatar stuff. Or," Sokka spread his hands, offering a shrug. "Maybe he just didn't know." He paused, deliberately. "If Dad tells me to go hunt zebra-seals down at the cove, and I stop and look over the water for leopard-sharks first, that doesn't mean I don't trust Dad. A good man of the tribe knows things *happen*. Just because the water was safe an hour ago, doesn't mean it is *now*."

Roku might be wrong. Aang swallowed, and felt like scrubbing his eyes. Teachers weren't supposed to be wrong!

"So young," Tao sighed. "Too young... Aang. He may have been the Avatar, but Roku is a spirit now. And while spirits of the dead may look in on the living, they often act on what they knew the world to be while they were alive. It's been a hundred and twelve years since Roku perished. The world is very different now."

"Fire Nation armor's changed, and that was just eighty-five years ago," Sokka nodded. "I don't know how far Hahn's guys got on Zhao's ship, but... well, not the point. The thing is, Chief Arnook didn't know it was different, and he's living in this world with the rest of us. Roku could have missed stuff."

"So the Northern Water Tribe did attack the Fire Navy?" Tao's brows climbed. "I had heard rumors, but I didn't know what to believe. Some went so far as to claim the entire Fire Navy was destroyed. I knew that couldn't be true, I've seen Fire Nation ships with my own eyes. Yet some of the invaders I've seen have seemed ill at ease. Which is very, very unusual." He glanced over them all, inviting the truth.

Aang had to look away. *I don't want to think about it. I had to, people were going to die - but it was awful.*

"Zhao attacked the spirits," Sokka said after a moment. "They helped Aang hit back. Some of the fleet got away; we ran into one of their ships later. But most of it didn't."

"Hah!" Tao pounded a fist on his leg with relish. "I saw the moon; I knew something extraordinary must have happened. Well done, young Avatar!"

Aang cringed. *Well done* wasn't exactly what he wanted to hear after all that death and terror.

"Very well-" Tao paused, eyes widening. "Oh no. Not good."

"Not good?" Katara gave the shaman a dark look. "How can saving the North Pole not be good?"

"Saving lives is always well done, even if it's hard on your enemies," Tao said firmly. "*Not good* is... I am a shaman, young waterbender. My concern is the dead as well as the living. Nothing is more dangerous to the living than the restless dead. And nothing is more likely to create malicious ghosts than spirit-dealt death." He paused. "Do those of the Northern Water Tribe know how to lay Fire Nation soldiers to rest?"

"Of course they do!" Katara said fiercely. "They didn't lose their benders to the Fire Nation. They fought!"

"Nor have we lost what we knew of death, and the spirits," Tao said gravely. "But it took time for us to accept that rites which console an Earth Kingdom spirit do not suffice for those of the Fire Nation. Simple, honorable burial does not gentle their ghosts to accept untimely death. They *must* be burned."

"You bury bodies?" Katara said, stunned. "How can you not give them back to the Ocean? That's wrong!"

"For you, perhaps," Tao said firmly. "For us, it is right and just. As those of the Fire Nation need a pyre, and Air Nomads need their sky burial. We are born of our element, and to it we must return."

"Sky burial?" Sokka turned the *weirdest* look on Aang. "How does that even work?"

Aang gulped. "It's, um... kind of messy. And we just ate!"

Now everybody looked weirded out. Except Tao. "I have seen it," he said mildly. "Those close to the dead take them high among the mountains, where the vulture-eagles will gather. Then they simply... render it easy for the scavengers to do what is natural."

"Uh," Toph managed. "Wow. That's..."

"Erk?" Sokka suggested.

"...Yeah."

"Told you it was messy," Aang said, cross. *Wait a minute.* "You've *seen* a sky burial? How old *are* you?"

"I believe I've lost count," Tao chuckled. "I was born... well, not long after Sozin invaded the Earth Kingdom the first time, before Avatar Roku drove him off. Which would be... hmm. Well over a hundred and thirty years ago, now."

You could hear the cricket-mice chirping.

"You look surprised," Tao mused. "The war often kills us early, but benders can live a long time. Fire Lord Sozin lasted over a century and a half; I was beginning to think he'd outlive me. Not that Azulon and Ozai have been any more charming." He frowned. "I almost miss Azulon. His forces conquered and killed ruthlessly, but they contented themselves with that. Under Ozai..." Anger flickered in green eyes. "What else can one expect, of a man willing to maim his own son?"

Aang swallowed, as the world seemed to drop out from under him.

"Aang?" Katara leaned toward him, barely held back by the fire.

Determined, Aang stood, glad that Tao and the others rose to match him. He bowed to the shaman. "Thank you for the lesson, Sifu Tao. Will you tell us more about the spirits tomorrow? I think-" He hesitated. "I think I need some time to think."

"Of course," Tao bowed back. "I wish you luck. All of you."

"It's dark," Katara objected. "You don't have to go."

"Night holds no terrors for me," Tao said kindly, his own bare feet stirring a puff of dust. "I may not see as you do, Toph, but I can find my way about. A shaman needs considerable time alone. Sometimes the spirits speak very softly, and if we're always listening to our fellow humans... that can be trouble."

Another nod, and he faded into the night.

Shamans have to be alone? Aang thought, petting Momo for comfort as he sat back down. *That sounds awful-*

Dust whirled, and he almost ended up flat on his face. "Cut that out!"

Pattering like snickers, Boot scurried away around the fire.

"Great. It's staying." Sokka heaved a sigh, then turned a concerned look on Aang. "You okay?"

"Yeah." If you didn't count wanting to toast a spirit, just a little-

But that filled his mind with flames again, and Aang shivered. "The Fire Lord did *that*?"

Toph whistled. "Nobody told you what Xiu told us?"

Aang perked up a little. "What'd she say?"

"A lot of things," Katara said firmly. "Why does it matter? We always knew the Fire Lord was a monster."

"Maybe you did." Aang looked down. "I was kind of hoping..." He swallowed. "That's why Zuko doesn't trust us."

Toph leaned back against some raised rock, intrigued. Sokka frowned. And Katara flung up her hands. "Of course he doesn't! We're going to stop the Fire Nation!"

"No," Aang said quietly. "He won't trust us because his father hurt him." He moved a hand, feeling air swirl in it. Seeing Zuko's scar again in his memories; a raw, red mess that looked like - like someone had just cupped a handful of fire against Zuko's face...

Don't look. Just... don't.

"I ran away because I thought - I thought Gyatso was just going to let the elders send me away," Aang explained. "And it *hurt*. And you say parents are like teachers..." He shook his head. "If Gyatso had really hurt me, I don't think I could trust *anybody*."

"The Fire Lord's evil," Katara stated. "We know that."

"Evil or not, he's Zuko's Dad," Sokka shrugged. "Just like Azula's his sister. Bleah." He stuck out his tongue. "Glad I'm not in *that* family." More serious, he eyed Aang. "So this is important?"

"Yeah." Aang leaned his chin on his fist, thinking hard. "Zuko can't trust us because the Fire Lord hurt him. And the Fire Nation can't trust the Avatar because Kyoshi hurt *them*. I know she didn't mean to, and I bet that Earth King deserves a kick in the butt. But they *think* she did it on purpose." He poked that cloud of an idea from every angle he could think of. Took a deep breath, and pointed at Toph. "But Zuko trusts *you*."

Everybody's eyes fixed on the earthbender. Even Appa, lying quietly out of spark range from the fire, let out a questioning snort.

"Huh. Ask the *easy* ones." Toph frowned. "First off, Twinkletoes, Zuko's not like a lot of the Fire Nation. He's been banished for three years, and he listens to Uncle. What works with him might not work with anybody else."

"I know," Aang admitted. "But right now? It's the best idea I've got."

"You want to get Zuko to trust you?" Katara tried not to bristle.

"We want to get the Fire Nation to trust us," Sokka said firmly. "We're going to have to fight the Fire Lord. And the army. And who knows what else. But remember Gaipan? Some people in the colonies are just people. If we can get *them* to trust Aang... maybe a lot of people won't have to die."

I don't want anybody to die! Aang tried not to shiver. But -*kick the ice and start walking*, Sokka had said. Maybe he couldn't see a way to save everybody *now*. But that didn't mean it wasn't out there. And maybe, just maybe, if he figured out how to save *some* people, he'd end up in the right spot to save more. "So how'd you do it?" he asked. "How'd you get him to trust you when you found him?"

"First problem, Twinkletoes," Toph said plainly. "He found *us*."

"Amaya," Katara muttered.

"You think so?" Toph smirked. "I thought you guys put the address on the posters."

Sokka slapped himself in the forehead.

"But he already knew where Appa was," Toph went on. "He found us after." She frowned, obviously remembering. "Boy, was he *mad*. Not *yelling* mad. Pretty calm. Mad inside, the kind that makes you shake all over and feel like banging your head off rocks. There we were, there *you* were, all set to be grabbed like a solstice gift. No Appa to get away on. No help from anybody else, not with Long Feng and the Dai Li in the way. He could have grabbed you. He could have *tried*, anyway, if the Dai Li kept out of it-

"We would have stopped him," Katara said angrily.

"And that's *why* he was mad," Toph said impatiently. "He finally figured it out. He *couldn't* take all of us. He *can't* take Aang. *He knows that*." She took a breath. "Trying to do what his Dad wanted, trying to catch Aang, *wasn't going to work*. So he *stopped*." She pointed at Aang. "And then he tried to figure out, screw his orders, what was the *right* thing to do?"

"So he wanted to let Appa go." Aang smiled.

"Not that simple," Toph shot back. "He didn't let Appa go for you. He did it for the Fire Nation. Remember that letter? Generals. Back you into a corner. North Pole all over again. That's what he figured might happen. And that wouldn't help *anybody* stop the war. Not us, not the Earth

Kingdom, not the Fire Nation. So getting Appa out, so *you* could get out, was what Zuko figured was the best thing he could do. And after he figured that out, that's when he asked Iroh to find me, and ask if I'd hear him out." She shrugged. "He told me everything, and he asked if I'd help. And I did. Because he didn't lie to me, and I could *hear* how much he was beating himself up over telling me he *couldn't* grab you. He knew it wasn't gonna work. Worse, it wasn't gonna work *and* lots of people would get hurt if he tried. He doesn't like hurting people." She was quiet a long moment. "So I don't know if that's gonna help. Zuko took a chance trusting me 'cause he was backed into a corner, and *not* getting help would have made things worse. But he had to be all the way back against a wall. *And* he had Uncle. And I think Uncle wants to help you. The Fire Army? Not so much."

Oh. Yeah, that made sense. Darn.

But bad as that was, there might be a way. Maybe. "We're going to stop the Fire Lord," Aang said thoughtfully. "If he's the guy who wants the war the most... then maybe after that, we can make them think stopping the war is the best thing to do."

"They won't," Katara said quietly.

But it was more of a sad quiet than an angry one, so Aang just asked, "Why?"

"They'd have to say they were wrong," Katara answered. "That they've been wrong for a hundred years. Who's going to say that?"

Aang felt his heart sink. *This isn't fair. It's impossible, it's too big-!*

"Jeong Jeong did," Sokka pointed out. Looked doubtful. "Though he's... kind of nuts."

Which made Aang want to smile all over again, suddenly relieved. "Bumi said we *need* mad genius." He thought about that some more. "If Zuko said Kyoshi drove the Fire Nation crazy - maybe it's the ones they think are crazy, that really aren't."

Sokka and Katara blinked. Momo scratched his ears. And Toph... smirked. "Uncle."

"Okay, I'll buy that," Sokka muttered. Eyed Toph, who was still smirking. "No."

"Oh, yeah," she grinned.

"Aw, no..."

"No, what?" Katara asked, curious.

Sokka gave Toph a narrow look. "You really think he went back there."

"Yep." Toph's grin was all teeth.

"Azula's going to *flatten* him!"

"She's gotta catch him first," Toph shrugged. "And he's good at being sneaky."

Katara stared at them. Aang looked between them, wondering why they were suddenly talking about Azula when they'd been talking about- "Zuko went back to Ba Sing Se? Why?" He wasn't going to help Azula after all. Was he?

Sokka let out a slow breath. "Toph? Clear me some dirt. I'm going to draw a map."

It wasn't a really good map. But with a little help from him and Katara, they had everything sketched into place. "Okay," Sokka went on. "Here's Chameleon Bay. Here's where we are. Here's where *Suzuran* was. Now remember that Zuko's responsible for the whole ship, and *Suzuran* can't fly." He tapped a stick on the ocean outside Chameleon Bay. "And remember there's a lot of Fire Navy ships that keep coming up this way, no matter how many of them Dad stops."

Right, ships needed water, so... Aang traced a path through lakes and north. "He's got to go past the city."

"But if he goes past, Azula's going to know something's up," Toph stated. "She's the princess in charge. *Suzuran*'s got to stop."

Aang gulped. "But if she finds him-"

"She thinks he's dead. He almost was. And he's sneaky." Toph crossed her arms. "Don't worry about Zuko. He wants to stay way, way away from you."

"Okay, that was just mean," Sokka grumbled.

"Why?" Katara gave her brother a sardonic look. "I think it's a *great* idea."

It probably was, Aang admitted to himself. Zuko and Katara in the same place were *scary*.

Besides, Toph was right. Zuko was sneaky. He'd be fine.

...Ow.

Warm feathers were nestled against him, and a beak was nibbling his hair. Which was just about the only part of him that didn't hurt.

"Finally," Amaya sighed in relief. "Gently, Iroh, gently..."

The hug was gentle, except for Asahi's grumble as she was shoved aside. "Uncle," Zuko breathed, tasting tea and smoke and worry. Not opening his eyes. Not yet. "The train?"

"Dispersed through the fleet," Iroh answered. "There were casualties; you and Shirong, frostbite, and some near-drownings. But very few fatalities."

"Azula." Zuko swallowed the guilt. "I tried... tired."

"You should be," Amaya said tartly. "There are limits to how much blood loss waterbending can mend. Get comfortable in that bed. You're staying in it a few days."

Zuko opened his eyes a crack, taking in his quarters on *Suzuran*, Amaya and Iroh's worried faces, Asahi ruffling her feathers as she peered at him... and a few others jammed in as well. "Captain Jee. I need to-"

"With all due respect, your highness, you need to stay right there," Jee said dryly. "In a few hours we'll hit the spot Earth King Kuei wanted us to bring his resistance troops to, and that should let us ditch the ferries. Without them, we can move faster; which is good, given we're counting on speed and wits to get us past patrolling ships. If we need waterbending on top of that, and I suspect we will, we need you as rested as possible." He smiled wryly. "Though I think earthbending alone may be enough of a surprise to get us clear of most trouble. Agent Shirong and Professor Wen have some interesting ideas."

Zuko glanced at the relieved Dai Li, who'd just nudged Teruko awake where she'd been leaning against the wall. Gingerly swept his gaze across the room to make sure Tingzhe and his family weren't there. And leveled a weak glare at Iroh. "When were you going to tell me Roku was *Ilah's father*?"

Jee choked.

"Ah," Iroh sighed. "I had hoped, never."

"*What?*"

"If you chose to help the Avatar, I wished it to be *your* choice," Iroh stated. "Not an obligation to our ancestors. You have had enough of those in your life. *More* than enough." The general looked over the room himself, and motioned for Teruko to listen at the door.

"Clear, sir," she reported.

He inclined his head. "There is an organization that wishes to restore balance to the world. You know it in passing, Amaya, for they have brought many of the Fire Nation to your door. Our ability to act is nowhere near as great as our desire to; we have a way of falling in the paths of conquerors. Chin, and Sozin, have only been two of those who have decimated us. But some of us survive. And we hope." His gaze rested on Zuko. "With a century passing, and no sign of the Avatar... our best chance to restore the balance was to work toward a true Fire Lord. One who understood the four elements, and how they need each other. One who would realize the war was *wrong*." He smiled. "That he would be of Roku's blood as well... we believed it could not hurt."

Zuko swallowed hard, vision graying at the edges. Faintly he could hear shocked gasps, Shirong's hiss of breath. "You set me up."

"Nephew-"

"You crazy, idealistic - you!" Zuko yelled, rising up, hands clawing air in a red-and-gray fury. "That's the *same damn mistake* all over again! One person to save the world? One Fire Lord to say oh, we're so *sorry*, we'll stop killing you and everybody will play *nice*? I'd be assassinated in a month! And if I wasn't, I'd still be under Kyoshi's decree! We'd still be going insane! Agni, what do you *think* happened to Sozin to make him crazy? He saw what being a loyal lord did to Zouge! Holding every clan together when half of them want to *fillet* the other half - it killed him! Sozin *watched* it kill him! And you - you-"

Trying to get up... was a mistake.

As the world blacked out, he felt Shirong catch him, and heard Amaya curse.

"General?" Teruko's voice was fading like everything else. "I know I promised him, but I think you'd better wait to tell him about Kuzon..."

"Is he right?" Amaya glanced back over her shoulder, blue eyes wide in the lamplight of their quarters. "Would someone dare assassinate the Fire Lord? Is that even possible? He holds your people's loyalty."

Iroh paused in brushing her hair. "It is possible," he said, resuming his strokes. "To break one's loyalty does not kill instantly. There is time for desperate acts." He hesitated. *No. Give her the truth.* "And the bonds of loyalty are not quite as straightforward as the Water Tribe's ties of family, village, and tribe. That is the order in which they hold you, is it not? Pakku has not always been

straightforward in his answers."

She started. "You know Master Pakku?"

"I have had the distinction of being frozen by him, yes," Iroh chuckled. "It is one reason I perfected the breath of fire."

"Master Pakku wants to bring balance back to the world?" Amaya's voice dropped. "I've wronged him, all these years."

"Perhaps," Iroh said judiciously. "Then again, he is the one who trained Katara."

"Hmm."

"Loyalty first binds a child to his parents," Iroh went on. "That bond begins to loosen when one is about thirteen, and taking on the responsibilities of an adult. It does not break, if the child chooses to remain loyal. Many do. Zuko is a responsible and honorable young man, so he remained bound; for Ozai was his father, and his clan head, and lord of the capital's domain, *and* the Fire Lord."

"Clan head?" Amaya shifted so he could pick apart some particularly stubborn strands. "Meixiang says Tingzhe's the head of Wen."

A shock and surprise, indeed. Earth and Fire, bound together? Could it even work? "He is," Iroh agreed. "As clan head, he is owed loyalty from his wife, his children, and his brother, Shirong. Once Shirong's children pass thirteen, they will owe their first loyalty to Tingzhe, for his is the senior branch of the clan. Unless, and only unless, it is evident the main family will perish without heirs. A living branch holds loyalty. A dying line does not."

Amaya stilled under his hands. "So when Lu Ten died..."

"My brother moved too quickly, and angered our father," Iroh acknowledged. "But he was within his rights. If I had no heir, and adopted no heir, then his was the living branch of the clan." He sighed. "But he did anger Fire Lord Azulon, and that snared our family in strangler's coils. For while Ozai should have been loyal to our father, Ursa was *not*."

Amaya held up a hand to halt his brushing, obviously thinking it through. "She would have been loyal to her children, her husband, and her parents..."

"But while Lady Kotone has made her bow before the Dragon Throne, that loyalty does not, and did not, bind her daughter," Iroh nodded.

Amaya winced. "No wonder he's so angry."

"He is often angry," Iroh sighed. "Though I had hoped he had grown past it-"

"Iroh." The healer gave him a level look. "You were the only one of his clan who hadn't betrayed him. And now he knows you've been lying to him."

True. Unfortunately. "For our people-"

"For the world," Amaya corrected. "If it were for your people, he'd understand."

Iroh's shoulders slumped. "I tried to teach him to care about the world."

"That scar seared more than his flesh," Amaya reminded him. "He fought to care about you, and then us, and then all of our people in Ba Sing Se. He's trying to bring airbending back." She spread

her hands. "How much more can you ask?"

Iroh smiled ruefully at his own, unguessed ambitions. "I suppose I wished a son who would follow in all my footsteps. But Zuko has never been drawn to Pai Sho."

"You would have made it work, if the spirits hadn't intervened," Amaya agreed. "I don't think any assassin would get past you." She had to pause, and take a steadying breath. "I know your folk on this ship aren't like that, but that Zuko thought of that so easily..."

"That may not have been simply Zuko," Iroh admitted. "Knowing what I do now, I have suspicions about Kuzon's death." He snorted ruefully. "I should have had them before. *In his sleep*, indeed."

Brushing stray strands out of her eyes, Amaya gave him a sidelong look. "Even in the Fire Nation, that must happen to *someone*."

"It often does," Iroh agreed. "And he was ninety-seven, even if he seemed as hale as men half his age. But a lord who is weakening will go *home*. So that he may tend to his people, and ensure they will be well led after his death. Yet Kuzon died in Shu Jing." He smiled wryly. "It is not quite as far from Byakko as Kyoshi Island is from Ba Sing Se. But it is not much nearer."

"Kuzon." Amaya frowned, and held out her arms for a comforting hug. "Tell me, Iroh. What are we dealing with?"

"Kuzon of Byakko." Swords against swords, Shidan held both Islanders off, eyes narrowed over a thin-lipped smile. "My father-in-law, and my best friend."

Okay, Saoluan thought, trying to catch her breath as steel strained against steel. *This guy? Definitely not human.*

She didn't worry about the crew working *Nami no Kizu* around them; they'd been treated like honored if slightly odd guests all the way up the river, even when she and Langxue chased Shidan across the deck with sharp pointy things to work off some steam. She had nothing to complain about. Except for the fact that talking to Shidan was... well, talking to someone that just wasn't quite meshed in with the rest of those who walked on two legs. Asking *why are you doing this, and don't tell me it's just spirits*, just hadn't cut it.

"Hold," she gritted out, waiting until the pressure against her wrists eased before drawing back her own blade and sheathing it.

"Saoluan?" Langxue frowned at her, but looked a little guiltily glad for the break. He was good, but he was still too young to have built up all the muscles needed to make swordplay look easy.

She beamed at him, then turned a wry glance on Shidan. "Maybe you could be a little more specific, honored dragon? I hate to talk anybody out of helping us, but the Fire Lord's going to smack an army on top of your people as soon as he knows you've switched sides."

Hands empty, Shidan's smile glinted, sharp-edged. "That would be unwise. Mount Shirotona is a water volcano."

"...Huh?" Saoluan blinked.

"There's two different kinds of volcanoes," Langxue said, with that distant frown she'd begun to recognize as hunting down something Hyourin remembered. "Earth and water."

"There are far more, but those two are the most critical to know," Shidan stated. "Earth volcanoes have gentle eruptions. Lava, a bit of ash; certainly dangerous for villages that can't move out of the way, but they give more than enough warning for most people to simply walk away. You have at least two on the Earth Kingdom's west coast. Apart from a few suicidal fools who've no better sense than to slip off the crater rims into lava pools, they haven't killed anyone in centuries." He paused. "Water volcanoes are not so kind."

Her little sword-brother's eyes widened. "Because there's water in the lava."

"Precisely," Shidan nodded, as Saoluan tried to fit together *water* and *molten rock* without making her head explode. "And that is what makes them deadly. The water becomes steam, boiling and building under a cap of stone; and what would happen if you sealed a clay pot of water, and placed it in a furnace?"

"Boom." Saoluan's heart sank. *Oh great. We're getting helped by a crazy dragon.* "And you live on this thing?"

"We do," Shidan stated. "We must. For without someone to speak to the White Tiger, the spirit of the mountain, to calm his rage and persuade him to allow our firebenders to bleed off bits of steam and lava, it *would* erupt. Not today. Not tomorrow. But when Shirotora roars, all the Fire Nation is in peril."

Not crazy. Not the way I thought, anyway. "You've blackmailed the Fire Lord," Saoluan said in admiration.

"Such an ugly word, Warrior." But the humor in pale gold didn't deny it. "The lords of Byakko have always done their duty to the clans, and to our nation. Mount Shirotora rests willingly under our care, respected and honored. We would not even think of being neglectful. The Fire Lord has nothing to fear from us."

"Yeah," Langxue said wryly. "As long as you're there. Where you can keep the lid on it. But if you're not..."

"That has almost happened, once." Shidan gripped the rail, hard nails *tinging* against steel, eyes dark with memory. "When Fire Lord Sozin ordered the Air Nomads destroyed. Byakko refused, and paid with their lives." He drew a sharp breath. "I- there was no warning. Makoto was clever, and Sozin even more so. We knew Sozin was rousing hate against the Air Nomads. We knew some of our clan elders - of the dragon clans - had vanished; we were searching for them, when..." He looked into the river, grieving. "I was able to heal Kuzon, and some others. But for weeks Mount Shirotora hung poised on the knife's edge, and Sozin knew it. So even though Lord Kuzon was fifteen, even though he was *known* to be a friend to airbenders - the Fire Lord dared not touch him."

Langxue raised a skeptical brow.

Shidan matched it with his own. "It would take more than two-score Fire Sages to force the White Tiger to submit. The moment they slipped, Shirotora would rage to cast the heavens down. Whereas even one of Kuzon's blood... the mountain knows us. No; Sozin was not so foolish as to risk weakening his forces. Not when he could have all he wished by simply leaving us alone."

"Now you're not making sense," Langxue complained, rubbing his head. "Sozin wanted to kill airbenders, and he left you alone?"

"A thousand years can make anything a legend," Shidan said dryly. "Airbenders, indeed. Why, any

schoolchild can tell you exactly what Air Nomads were like. They were detached from the world, careless and cruel enough to call hurricanes down. They rode sky bison. They had tattoos, and they never ate meat." He gestured at Langxue's katana. "And they *certainly* never carried swords."

"Detached?" Langxue said in disbelief. "Come on! The temple monks, *maybe*. But nobody could call the Duo Qang-"

"Xiangchen destroyed that tribe," Shidan said quietly. "Or so my clan said, long ago."

"Who?" Saoluan asked, as Langxue paled.

"There once were several tribes who roamed the winds," Shidan informed her. "Long ago, before the world went wrong. Before Subodei, and Xiangchen, and the Invasion of the North." His laugh had just a trace of bitterness. "I suppose we must call it the *first* Invasion of the North, now. Avatar Hirata would never have dreamed his death would lead to this..." He sighed. "Unfortunately, some of the Duo Qang's descendants did survive."

Airbenders. There are airbenders, still alive, Saoluan realized. "How can that be a bad thing?"

"Because today they are not called Duo Qang, but *onmitsu*," Shidan said bluntly. "The Fire Lord's own chi-blockers... and assassins."

Winter rains sheeted down; blinding the moon, rendering merely mortal eyes and ears near useless. Chill rains, soaking through haori and robe and tabi, as he danced with steel across the moss and decorative stones of the inn's contemplative garden. Sweet, fresh rains, that almost washed the taste of blood from his mouth.

Almost let him believe he wasn't dying.

I never would have picked Shu Jing as a place to die.

Well. He was fairly sure Temul hadn't wanted to die here, either. Doubly ironic, that her death would lead to his own. He'd grown used to the acerbic ghost over the years. They'd shared so many secrets; so much pain. Her smoldering hatred of the Fire Lords had not died with Sozin, and she watched Azulon's agents like a raging dragon. Of all the world outside Byakko an old firebender might roam, Shu Jing had always been safe.

Not this night.

Some Fire Sage must have found a way to bind her. Agni, grant her the strength to win free!

Ironic, to be praying for a ghost over his own life. But Temul was iron and flame; so long as she existed, her heart would never be broken.

His - had shattered. Was shattering, with every rain-soaked chi-blocker he cut down.

Heiya. Arisama. Shiri...

He knew them. All of them. Agni, he and Ran had sent welcoming-gifts to half of their births!

Ran...

His beloved lady. The other half of his soul. Dead and lost these two years, swept overboard in a storm while traveling from the capital. An *accident*.

As this would undoubtedly become, no matter how many dead bodies he scattered about the grounds.

I pray you're not seeing this, Ran.

Duck and slash and twin dao licking out to slice rain and cloth and bone...

That assassin fell without a whimper, darts flying in a storm even as his leg and hand went their separate ways. Rain and a swirl of steel blocked four-

The fifth and sixth sank into his shoulder, biting to the bone. He staggered back, dao dropping from the dead weight of his right hand.

Damn. So close...

Rain faded, one band of clouds passing to leave a few minutes' gap of quiet. The moon couldn't quite break through... but there was enough light to see ranks of dark-garbed assassins, waiting in silent menace on the inn roof.

Not close at all.

He smirked, and knew it was stained with blood. Heiya had managed more than just a poke to block his bending, in those fatal seconds when grief and bewilderment had overridden instinct. Surely, *surely* one of his own rescued could not intend-

Yet surely she did, and just as surely he'd killed her. Autumn Lord have mercy on her spirit.

But unable to bend, unable to heal... she'd killed him, too.

Just as Azulon intended. Bastard. Coward!

He'd spent his life sowing confusion among his enemies. He wasn't about to break the habit now. "I see Azulon cared enough to send his best," he panted, breathing shallow. "I suppose I should be flattered, Tahou. You so rarely take the field yourself anymore."

Silence. One of the taller masked figures fluttered off the roof, landing... not quite in range for a lunge. Damn it.

Above masking cloth, pale eyes measured his own calculation, and smirked. "And what makes you think we do this for Azulon, Lord of Byakko?"

He chuckled bitterly, no matter how much it hurt. "You're all his lapdogs, Tahou. Telling yourselves you serve to save the many, by killing the few... The Temples were blind, but you? You've corrupted an ignorant way of peace into abomination."

No rumble of hate, not from such as these; but there was a stiffening of darkness in the rain. "Do not dare speak of our ways, thief!"

"Ah," Kuzon breathed. "So this is Ja Aku's will, as well as Azulon's." A laugh; a cough. "I wish I were surprised."

"You destroyed our heritage-"

"I couldn't save the bison, you sanctimonious old fool!" Kuzon snarled. He'd made himself heard across battlefields before; he'd make himself heard now. No matter how little good it would do. "They're large. They're *obvious*. Half my clan was dead! All I could save were children!"

"You robbed us of our future!"

You robbed yourselves. "And the old hermit picked up the sea cobra, and fed it bits of fish, and warmed it in his bosom through the killing cold of night," Kuzon mused. "And at dawn it struck, and slithered away as he lay dying. For that is the nature of serpents." He tightened his grip on the remaining hilt, ever so slightly. "How fitting that, this night, you give truth to Sozin's lie. The ever-treacherous, *murderous* Air Nomads."

Some of those shadowy figures above tensed; Tahou raised a gloved fist, halting them. "It's not too late to live. Swear that you will unearth your own treachery, and your chi will be restored."

"No," Kuzon said simply. Watching shadows in the rain.

Somewhat *fewer* shadows, now.

"You'd condemn your clan to-"

"To what?" Kuzon snarled, tired of pretty half-truths, and sneering lies. "Does your master think Kotone won't *know*? He has our Ursa; if he wants more, the blood will be on his hands. Our nation's blood! Will he shed that, with a world willing our country's death?" He snorted, the world turning a darker gray with dizziness. "Cross into Byakko if you dare. Shidan will rip you apart."

Old friend. Son I never had. I'm sorry.

And yet another shadow vanished into the night.

They'll notice soon. What can I- ah. He staggered a step sideways, painfully aware it wasn't an act. "Best gloat while you can," he gasped. "You won't have much longer."

Tahou stood still. *Almost* surged forward-

Yes! Take the bait, you treacherous fool! Because if Tahou was *here*, there was still one thing more he needed to hear from Kuzon's own lips. If he could just hang on a little longer...

"Where are they?" Tahou ground out.

And now Kuzon could smile, the pain of betrayal easing to something... bearable. It wouldn't be for much longer, after all. "Your brothers and sisters? You'll never know." He'd been fifteen and terrified and grieving - but Shidan had been with him. And no one knew predators like a dragon.

Scatter them, Shidan had advised, in the play of images and feelings that was a dragon's silent song. *Friend with friend, and those who act as kin together, yes - but scatter those kin-groups away from each other. Let them know the others live; never let them know where.*

The Lord of Byakko holds Mount Shirotona in check, and so is safe from Sozin's wrath. If he seems to know nothing. Be that lord. Hold their existence in your heart.

And carry it to your grave.

"You've already tried to ask Temul," Kuzon breathed now. "She's not here because you bound her to demand her answer. And she *doesn't know*." He coughed, tasting copper. "And now you've killed the only man who does."

Pale eyes flared wide with rage above the mask. "You will *not* deny us-!"

Keening to chill the wind, Temul's wraith shimmered from the storm clouds. A blue-glowing jian

saluted the sky, and slashed *down*-

Lightning struck, blasting roof and assassins into a cloud of gore-streaked tiles.

Faint in the crash of thunder, Kuzon thought he heard a young man's, "Whoa! Watch it!"

But that was yards away. Here, now, Tahou had twitched. As who *wouldn't* twitch, between ghost and lightning and death...

Tahou knew who he faced. Knew better than to let his attention stray. Yet decades of training couldn't kill a man's nature. One foot slipped slightly to the side, abandoning balance to ready himself for flight-

Kuzon lunged.

Everyone remembers a dao's blade. Never the point.

Though Tahou certainly looked as if he'd remember it...

And then the assassin's face went slack, and the body fell, and Kuzon fell with it.

Black and red and... someone lifting his head. Warm hands, and breathing. Not Temul.

"Hang on," said a familiar young voice; one Kuzon had heard only yesterday, giving an informal report on conditions in the Earth Kingdom. "I'll get a healer-"

"Don't be a fool, Major Piandao," Kuzon rasped. "You've been on enough battlefields... to know there's no time." He breathed, looking at the not-quite-solid old woman standing at a young soldier's shoulder. "So you've met. Good. Explain what you can, old friend. After... after you get him out of here."

"Lord Kuzon," Piandao began.

"*You can't be here*," Kuzon rasped. "By dawn, you'd best be anywhere *but* here. And you will be visibly surprised, but not upset, to hear the lord of Byakko... died in his sleep."

"But-"

"You're *not*," Kuzon coughed. "Not *stupid*, Major. Don't act the fool." *Breathe*. "I've done... as much damage as I can to Azulon's war. Speak of my death, and he'll suspect you as well."

"And he'd be right," Temul smirked, voice a mutter of rain and wind. "We've killed a good fourth of Azulon's tame nomads. He won't build those forces again in a hurry." At his fading glare, she snorted. "You think I ever liked those scatterbrained, truth-twisting sky-riders? Hah!"

"Nomads?" A ghost might not have rattled the swordsman's nerve, but this did. "They were nomads? But the airbenders are-" He cut himself off, and gripped the hand Kuzon could still feel. "Sir. Your family..."

"Knows what they must," Kuzon got out. "Knows... *why*." He forced himself to focus on the major's face. "You... serve Azulon. To serve our people." *Hang on. Just a little longer*. "Azulon... will destroy us all. *Choose*."

And the rain faded, and hands faded. And, finally, the pain ebbed away.

But not the ache in his heart.

I waited too long. Planned too long. I searched for you, Aang - Agni, I searched!

I should have stopped.

The Avatar is gone. You are gone, Aang; I scoured the world for you, and there was no trace. But the world is still here.

And the Fire Lords will destroy it.

If only I'd known. If only I had some way-

Fire in the darkness. Pain and anger and the razor-edged colors of hope...

"Some way, child of fire?"

My Lord...

Warmth wrapped him; stern as iron, unyielding as the sun. *"There is a way,"* flames crackled, *"to keep your promise."*

Tell me.

The scent of feathers was all that kept him from blasting something.

It's not raining. I'm not dead.

But I was.

"I am Zuko," he breathed to the darkness, gauging the feel of sun-returning to almost dawn. "Son of Ursa, and Fire Lord Ozai. Prince of the Fire Nation, and once heir to the Dragon Throne!"

But I remember...

Not hard-edged, except for that lingering nightmare that had been reality. More like a well-loved story, read over and over for all its terror and wonder, until he could almost touch what it would have been if it were *real*.

It was real.

Kuzon of Byakko. Agni, no wonder Teruko hadn't wanted to tell him.

Iroh, though...

"I need air." Working his way out from under the covers, Zuko paused to catch his breath. Patted a clucking Asahi on the neck. "Bet you want some too, huh?"

The black hen huffed, and caught his hair in her beak, just for a moment.

"I know, I know; I promised bad guys," Zuko apologized. "We'll just have to find some the next time we land."

From the snort, Asahi didn't quite take that as an acceptable excuse. But she got up, letting him lean on her when the world spun a little, and headed sedately for the hatch.

...Working the seal on a hatch when the room kept graying out was *not fun*.

Have to ask Captain Jee if they've given our refugees the safety drill. There's no way Jinhai could manage this.

Eventually, it clanged open. Zuko winced, expecting marines to pounce and drag him back to bed-

Nobody pounced. There were two firebenders in the hall eyeing Asahi, and she snaked her head with malicious glee, but they just stood there. "Morning, sir," the elder said, politely taking off his faceplate to expose a weathered, clean-shaven face. "Healer Amaya said you shouldn't be up."

"I'll take it slow, Sergeant Kyo," Zuko promised, already tired. "But I need..." *To get away from dying.* "I need some sun."

Asahi had her eye fixed on the other marine, tilting her head as he twitched nervously. Zuko flicked her head near her ear. "No. Leave Private Sukekuni alone."

"Thanks?" Sukekuni squeaked, as Asahi snickered her way past.

Zuko sighed. Eyed them both, and led her on. "There's more to life than just biting people."

"Skrrr..."

"Yes, I know it's probably the best part," Zuko said wryly. Down, and another hatch, and out-Dawn.

He found a quiet spot of guardrail and clung to it, soaking up that reviving strength.

The sun rises. The sun sets. No matter how crazy the rest of the world gets.

Given what he knew, what he remembered... it was pretty crazy.

Zuko's hands tightened on steel. *Azulon ordered me... ordered Kuzon murdered.*

Probably for more than one reason. If Azulon had discovered that he'd hidden survivors from the South and West temples, then Azulon probably also guessed he was the last human link to them. Meaning either Ja Aku's onmitsu would torture the locations out of him before he died... or they wouldn't.

If they'd gotten the sites, he'd pick them off one by one, so the onmitsu could drag them into harmonious accord and fold them into the families. If I just died - any survivors would stay away from the onmitsu, like everyone steers clear of the Fire Nation. And Azulon would never risk losing his pet assassins to what Air used to be.

Either way, Azulon won what he wanted. And if that cost him a quarter of the onmitsu's forces... well. Azulon had planned to live as long as Sozin. He'd counted on having *decades* to increase his power.

Except he didn't.

Zuko had no doubts, now, that Ursa had killed Fire Lord Azulon. Byakko had been walking the knife-edge of rebellion so very, very long, to protect their island and their children...

And he was angry and confused and so *proud*. She hadn't broken. She hadn't wavered. She was Byakko, and dragon-child, and she'd *lived* honor.

Next to that, his own quest for the Avatar looked pathetic.

Breathe. All we have is here. All we have is now.

And he only had now because he *had* no luck. He'd given it all up into Agni's hands, so there might be a chance of unsnarling Koh's webs before they strangled the world. So one young prince, *not* the heir, would have the soul-deep knowledge that something was *wrong*. That the world shouldn't be this way. That the Fire Nation should be respected for its honor, not feared for its ruthless slaughters.

"That... didn't quite work," Zuko muttered.

Why it hadn't was painfully clear now. Besides Lu Ten dying - and he had all kinds of suspicions about *that*, given what he knew about his father and Long Feng - Kuzon hadn't been a dragon-child. Kuzon had been a relatively ordinary master firebender, no more stubborn or crazy than... oh, Jee. Kuzon had been *sane*. Rational. Easy-going enough to take a temple full of airbenders in stride. He'd loved his wife, and daughter, and Shidan - and had still been caught completely off-guard the first time one of his granddaughters had bitten him.

Zuko vaguely remembered biting a few servants himself when he'd been little. Before Ursa had done what Shidan had done with her, decades before: grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, shook him - gently, but with fire in her fingertips - and told him *no*. *Not prey*. *Bad*.

It worked. Eventually.

Sozin was a dragon-child, Zuko thought now, gripping steel. *Agni set it up, so the Avatar would know what drives the Fire Nation... spirits, that blew up.*

Sozin, and then Azulon was twice over. And Ursa was. He rested his head on the railing, feeling cool steel warm from his temper. *I am screwed.*

He might have Kuzon's spirit, but he'd been born with enough dragon blood that a hundred years ago, no clan would have dared send him to court. He'd get himself *killed*.

Well, almost.

And if Kuzon hadn't realized what he was getting into, Agni *did* know. The spirit of fire knew his children.

But I had Lu Ten. Zuko lifted his head, swallowing the lump in his throat. *Things weren't really bad until...*

The world is so screwed up.

And Aang had no idea. He'd gone from a world of apparent peace - Gyatso had always chosen their trips *very* carefully - to one where, if the war hadn't seared its way through a place, people were living on borrowed time. And they *knew* it.

No wonder he couldn't figure out Ba Sing Se. It's probably the first place that felt normal.

Agni, Aang didn't even know about the yamabushi; much less the onmitsu, or the Touzaikaze of the Si Wong Desert, or... spirits, a half-dozen other small groups that knew enough to just whisper away on the wind when trouble threatened.

And if he doesn't know that, he has no idea why Shidan made sure we met in the first place. Or what Uncle Kuroyama was planning with Gyatso. Or what the elders were really going to do to him if Gyatso couldn't stop them.

Zuko shuddered, guiltily relieved. Aang might have the attention span of a flutter-hornet on a honey high, but that impulsive decision might just have saved the world. An Avatar, twisted the way the temples twisted all the nuns who hesitated to give their children up? The way onmitsu made sure all their active agents were twisted?

Ty Lee. I'm so sorry.

And it hurt, it hurt so much, because he *hadn't known*. Spies and assassins, yes; but Ty Lee's relatives had families, they looked happy, they'd looked like somewhere *safe* to put some of the children he and Temul had rescued...

Until he'd sat down one awful night, still trying to get the domain in order, and put together some of the reports Byakko's own agents had sent their young lord. Reports indicating the onmitsu had suddenly gained a swarm of newborns to look after. All with the same slight build, and laughing gray eyes...

Sozin never meant to kill the children. Not all of them.

The Northern Temple had been laid ruin, monks and boys slaughtered to the last. The Eastern... had been *harvested*.

And if that weren't gut-wrenching enough, that was the night he'd finally pieced together the rest of Kuroyama's plan: to introduce a young monk to his distant kin, to *see* what the temples had driven out, and how it had maimed their own spirits. A plan that had died in the comet's flames.

I have to do something.

Zuko gripped steel harder, and swore under his breath. *I am doing something. I'm getting these people out of the line of fire. I'm going to keep the Fire Army from grabbing the Mechanist back. I'm going to make a place airbenders can live without tearing themselves apart just because they're human. And we're all going to call the drowned home, so things don't get even worse.*

Drowned spirits all around the Spirit Oasis, where Koh could cross into the physical world on sheer whim. The Face-Stealer had to be laughing like hell.

"Um." The eyes and queue of the man eyeing him said Earth Kingdom; the ragged bangs and water-worn loose clothing said independent merchant captain, or worse. "You got a grudge against that rail, kid?"

Zuko blinked, realizing Asahi had warily backed off. As who wouldn't, when steel was glowing red-hot. *Oops*. "And you are?"

"Donghai. Captain," he said, as if it weren't obvious. His expression seemed caught between wary and sour. "Didn't know the Fire Nation recruited kids as firebenders."

Zuko smirked. "I was born into the job."

"Born into the-" Donghai stared at him. Glanced over the rail and back, where a ragged fleet of red-sailed ships was making as much as they could of dawn's light winds. "...No way."

Zuko raised his eyebrow.

"I know Shirong said – and that Sadao guy, but...." Dongahi trailed off, shaking his head. "This is even crazier than I thought."

Zuko let go of steel before it blazed any hotter. *Damn it, I know how risky-*

Donghai's mouth turned up at one corner. "Just might work after all."

Zuko eyed him, aware that Sergeant Kyo was lingering unobtrusively in the background and Asahi had just ruffled her feathers in a way that promised friendly mayhem.

"Ah, there you are, Captain Donghai." Jee stalked up, glancing at the hot air shimmering around the railing. And gave his young commander a *look*.

Zuko flushed, and took a step sideways to make sure he could grab Asahi if she got cranky. *It was just the railing! I didn't set anything else on fire!*

But he didn't say it. *Suzuran* was Jee's command, and the captain had every right to take anyone who threatened her to task. He might not have always respected that before, but he was *going* to do better now. No matter how hard he had to bite his own tongue to do it.

"Captain Donghai is here to represent some of our allies in the fleet, as we discuss options," Jee went on. "Will you be joining us for tea?"

Zuko tried not to grimace at the undertone: *You and I both know you shouldn't be up. How far are you going to let your pride push you?*

As if he didn't know collapsing in front of their allies was a bad idea.

"I believe I'm going to take Healer Amaya's advice, Captain," Zuko said formally. "Please inform General Iroh that I have full confidence in you both." He paused. "And... tell my uncle I understand why he did what we spoke about earlier. I don't agree with it. But I understand." *Do I tell him?*

...Yes. No more lies. "And tell him, and Agent Shirong, that when it comes to obligation, Roku's going to have to get in line. I remember Kuzon."

"All right." Shirong looked over the small wardroom Iroh had borrowed, trying to gauge exactly why the occupants wouldn't meet his eyes for long. And why Zuko's enigmatic statement had gathered these three to talk to him. Teruko, Amaya, and the general himself, yet not one of the Wens, or Captain Jee? Why? "I can understand that obligations to one great-grandfather might outweigh obligations to another, depending on the circumstances." Fire Lord Sozin, Avatar Roku, and Lord Kuzon of Byakko. Spirits, he had to wonder if there were any other pots of blasting jelly in the branch of Zuko's family tree he *didn't* yet know about. "But how does the prince remembering Kuzon make a difference? Spirits don't usually make allowances for human frailties like memory. They hold you accountable whether you remember you've promised or not."

Silence. A guilty, prickly silence in which no one met his eyes.

Oh, this is bad. "All right," Shirong said carefully. "What's the obligation Zuko's being held to?" When in doubt, try to find the spirits' deal. And see if you could force a loophole.

Iroh coughed into his hand, looking as if he wished his cup held something stronger than tea. "It would seem Kuzon promised to find Aang, bring him back, and make him apologize for fleeing his destiny."

Oh. Oh my; that explained quite a bit about the mysterious Fire Nation lord and spy. Including the letter Jinhai was holding on to, and why it'd been found where it had. Where better to look for clues

about an Air Nomad Avatar, than in lore of the last Air Nomad Avatar? Still, there was a slight problem with Iroh's statement. "Kuzon is dead," Shirong pointed out. "And while the spirits may not hold to, *he who dies, pays all debts*, any obligation Kuzon incurred should be stuck in the spirit world with him. It shouldn't force Zuko to carry out any part of it, any more than he's forced to uphold the balance for Avatar Roku and Ta Min, or wipe out the Air Nomads for Fire Lord Sozin and Tejjina. Unless his last set of great-grandparents incurred some really nasty spiritual debt...?"

"Dragons pay their own debts," Teruko said firmly. "Shidan's clan didn't bring this on the prince."

Dragons? Shirong thought, stunned. *What on earth does she mean by-*

If he hadn't been keeping an eye on the most dangerous person in the room out of sheer paranoid habit, he'd have missed it. But he was, and Shirong saw the slight quirk of Iroh's smile.

Okay, don't ignore it, it is important, Shirong told himself firmly. *But get it out of them later. He's using it to distract you from whatever this mess with Kuzon is. Which means that's even more important.*

On top of that, Teruko still looked incredibly guilty. "I suppose I should just ask him," Shirong mused.

...And didn't that set the cat-owl among the chicken-pigs. Though it was a horrified silence, not squawking oinks, that sank into the corners of the room.

"I will ask him, you know," Shirong said levelly. "He saved my life on that train. Even if he nearly scared me out of it later." Putting them both on a *boat*, for Guanyin's sake. When he knew earthbenders and water didn't mix!

Though being on *Suzuran* wasn't nearly as bad as the horror stories he'd heard from Dai Li agents forced to sail over Lake Laogai. The metal was stern, yes, obviously meant for war... but then, so was the Outer Wall. He could stand it here. So far.

That Captain Jee had taken on pieces of the train itself as ballast, specifically for the comfort of earthbenders on board, definitely hadn't hurt.

"It is difficult to speak of," Iroh said heavily.

"He means you'll think we're all mad," Amaya put in, blue eyes dark with worry. "We're not. I have never heard the legend Iroh tells in either of our nations, but from what I sensed in Zuko's spirit..." She let out a slow breath. "It's real. I don't know how it can be, how any spirit could make that choice. But he did."

Shirong felt chill. "Choice?"

Iroh sighed. "Zuko is bound by Kuzon's obligation because, in a sense, *Kuzon* is no longer dead." The general hesitated. "Though it seems he was sleeping. A mercy from Agni, that should never have been reft away. Yangchen has much to answer for."

Shirong fit facts and implications together, and staggered back against a friendly wall. *Guanyin have mercy*. "Zuko... has lived before. And knows it."

Iroh inclined his head.

Oh, hell.

Everyone *knew* reincarnation was the way of the world. This life was but one among many, preached the sages and monks; and a human who was virtuous would be reborn as yet another human life, just as the Avatar was. But that was always years, even *centuries* later. To return while your kin in the third degree remained alive tangled the whole web of an innocent child's destiny. Obligations of the past, obligations of the present - a soul could go mad, trying to balance them all. And even if he escaped that fate...

He'd have the worst luck in the world.

Numbly, Shirong realized that the wall was all that was holding him up, and Amaya was cradling a ball of water in concerned hands. "I'm all right," he said raggedly. "I will be, at least... Oma and Shu. What did he ever do to deserve *that*?"

"If the legends are true," Iroh said, very carefully, "he would have offered himself to Agni's task deliberately. To stand as ally to kin or friend who desperately needed it; as he would have stood to the last, had he not died."

"Lady Kotone's letter said he was looking for a *friend*," Shirong's heart sank. "He was searching for Avatar Aang..."

"They were friends," Iroh nodded. "However Zuko may deny it now."

"It's not denying it when the kid's tried to *kill* him," Shirong grumbled. "Shale and shards, *why*?"

"I did not know Lord Kuzon well," Iroh admitted. "He was one of my father's spies, one of the few firebenders left old enough to remember the world before the war, and Azulon did not trust him. But he had unflinching honor. If Agni revealed to him that Aang would return to the world, and this might be the last, best chance to restore balance - I believe he would not hesitate." Iroh looked grave. "I pray I would not, if such a fate were offered me."

"Because if it were you, the fate of the world would come first," Shirong mused. "No matter what it did to everyone around you." It fit. Damn. "No wonder you don't want to face him. Kuzon might have chosen to do that to himself, but *you* were about to do it to your own nephew."

Iroh winced. Amaya didn't. "What else should he have done?" the healer said reasonably. "The tribe has to come first."

No help there. And the general's feeling guilty, but not enough to change his mind, Shirong thought. *Teruko, though...* "A few months ago, I would have agreed with you," the agent admitted. "Before I realized my generals were about to use a twelve-year-old child as a weapon." He met Amaya's gaze, unflinching. "I don't know what you're willing to do in the Water Tribes, but if we'd done that to save Ba Sing Se, we would have deserved *everything* the Fire Nation's done to us."

"The airbender is a child," Iroh stepped in to defend her. "But Zuko is a prince of the Fire Nation. He was raised to accept command, and responsibility."

"And he'll keep being responsible until it kills him," Shirong said bitterly. "Weren't you listening, general? Didn't you hear anything he said? Anything *you* said? Kuzon didn't come back for the world. He *definitely* didn't come back for the Fire Lord."

Gold eyes narrowed at him. "Then why?"

"If you can't figure that out," the agent said wryly, "then you'd better ask him."

"Ocean spirits, river spirits, wind spirits, well spirits, mine spirits - *mine* spirits?" Ticking them off on his fingers as Katara stirred their lunch stew, Aang turned an incredulous look on Tao. "Mines are people digging into the earth. How can they have a spirit?"

"Hey, I dig in the earth all the time," Toph objected.

"Yeah, but that's bending," Aang pointed out. "That's different."

"You think so?" Sokka was giving him another of those weird *considering* looks. "I thought you were glad Tao's people were up in the air."

"I am," Aang nodded. "But that's different. Maybe they're not bending, but they're not hurting anything, either."

Tao raised a gray brow. "So you think a bender would never harm the earth?"

"You feel your element," Katara stated. "How could you ever hurt it?"

"Most benders will never be so attuned to their element as you are, young lady," Tao stated.

"Among many peoples in the Earth Kingdom, nobles try to avoid ever touching the earth, unless they are obligated to bend it. Ride, certainly, or take coaches, or palanquins - but allow one's own feet to be soiled? That is for farmers. And soldiers. And *peasants*."

He gave the word the same twist Zuko had, fighting Katara. Aang felt something in his insides curdle.

Tao's tone softened, friendly again. "They forget their debts to the earth that bore them. Just as the Fire Nation wishes to forget that once they were the honor of the world." He looked down. "It's a sad world you've been handed as your charge, young man. We are all so broken. I've searched for ways to heal us for almost a century. And with everything I try, I only uncover deeper wounds."

"Sozin wrecked the whole world," Sokka said soberly. "Man."

Katara stirred the embers. "It didn't start with him."

"Really?" Tao leaned back a bit, as if he were just politely interested.

But he's not, Aang realized. *He knows something!*

"Xiangchen came for the air-healers, and Chin came for the earth-healers, and Sozin... he came for the fire-healers," Katara said quietly.

She couldn't have said what he thought she'd just said. She *couldn't* have. "Xiangchen did what?" Aang sputtered.

"Earth-healing," Tao mused, ignoring him. "Now, there's a legend I've not heard spoken in a long time. A long time," he said, half to himself. Letting out a slow breath, he focused on the present once more. "How did you know about Chin?"

"...The Moon spirit gave me a vision."

"Ah." Tao nodded.

Aang blinked at him, distracted even from that impossible thing she'd said about Xiangchen. "Ah? She talked to the *Moon!*"

"And that is an honor and a blessing." Tao frowned, eyeing him. "Oh dear. Did you think that was something remarkable?"

"But..." Aang swallowed hard. "The Avatar's the bridge between our world and the spirits."

"Of course," Tao nodded. "But at the end of every Avatar's lifetime, that bridge is gone for many years. Those of us without such power, but with need, can find the shallows to cross, if one from the other side is willing to meet us. Even if we are not deserving." His eyes looked haunted. "Even if we could never be deserving."

That didn't sound good. Aang glanced at the others, seeing them tense. Toph looked calm, but he could tell by the careful angle of her feet that anything that twitched wrong was going to get flattened. "What do you mean?" he asked carefully. "You seem like a good guy. Why wouldn't the spirits talk to you, if they wanted to?"

Tao sighed, and bowed his head. "Avatar Aang. Airbender Aang. Much as I am glad to teach you of the spirits, that is not, truly, why I am here." He bowed deeply. "I came to beg your forgiveness."

"Why?" Aang wondered, fear making his throat dry. Were they going to be betrayed to the Fire Nation again? Were they going to have to run again, because he wasn't strong enough to win? "What'd you do?"

"Nothing," the old man said quietly. "A hundred years ago... I did nothing."

"I don't understand," Aang protested. But he did, oh spirits, he did. And it was *horrible*. "Why... why would you do that? What did we ever do to you?"

"Young man." Tao did look up then, green eyes dark with old pain. "What on earth makes you think it was anything you did?"

He wanted to whimper. He did. Because if that was true - if that was true then the world wasn't fair, and the spirits weren't fair, and that couldn't be right! Because if spirits weren't fair, then-

Aang's mind shied from ice and night and pain. *I'm the Avatar. I'm supposed to make things fair.*

Katara gripped his shoulder, and squeezed gently. "I think you'd better explain, Master Tao."

The shaman grimaced. "It is not an easy thing to speak of." He sighed. "Nor should it be."

"So you did let the Fire Nation get to the temples," Toph said flatly.

"Yes," Tao admitted. "We did."

Aang swallowed, but couldn't get the words out. Glanced at Sokka, gray eyes imploring.

"I'll bite," Sokka half-sighed. "Why?"

"Because we didn't care."

Aang stared at him, wanting to shake. Wanting to - to hurt someone, and that was just awful. Didn't care? They didn't *care*?

"We are earth, and we remember." Tao's face was haunted. "It's good to honor the past, so the traditions which bind us as peoples live on. But memory cuts for good and ill, and too often we forget earth's true heart: not tradition, but *compassion*." He looked down. "We cling to grudges

centuries old as a miser does jade coins. And so we remembered what you did not do, when Chin the Conqueror savaged his way across our lands. And as you had stayed your hands, so we stayed ours. We saw the Fire Nation massing. We heard their tales of hate, and we could guess what they meant to do. And we did - nothing."

"How?" Katara's voice shook, and her hand clenched painfully on Aang's shoulder. "How could you? They killed everyone. Every sky bison. Every child!"

"It's easier than you think, when you don't see it happen," Tao said sharply. "You tell yourself they're nomads. Perhaps they've only flown away. You tell yourself the Fire Nation was too strong to fight. That the Avatar should have stopped them, as Roku did Fire Lord Sozin's first invasion. And worst of all," his breath caught, and worn hands gripped his staff like a twig in a flood. "Worst of all, you lie to yourself, and say they deserved it. That they were arrogant. That they were outsiders, who took and gave nothing in return, and no concern of yours. That they should suffer for the sins of their forebears, who flew overhead as your ever-so-great-grandfather's crops were burned, and his brothers slaughtered, and his wives and daughters violated. And did *nothing*." He stared into awful memory. "You tell yourself all of that. And all of it is true, and still a lie. For there is nothing, *nothing*, that justifies abandoning Guanyin's mercy. But we did. And so, we allowed a people to die."

"And you want Aang to *save* you?" Katara snarled.

Aang felt sick. "Katara-"

"No," Tao said firmly. "We who abandoned Guanyin, out of fear or hatred - we do not deserve the Avatar's aid. But our children..." He lifted his gaze, and the pain there was terrible. "I can ask for nothing. But for those born to know only war, who never had the chance to fail your people-"

"Stop," Aang said faintly. "Just - stop."

His friends went quiet. Sokka gave him a serious look. "Aang?"

"Being the Avatar isn't about who deserves help," Aang managed. "It's about making things right. The world needs to be balanced again. That means we have to stop the Fire Nation." He swallowed. "And it means I forgive you."

Tao glanced away. "I don't deserve it."

"Gyatso said once, nobody *deserves* to be forgiven." Aang remembered that day, trying not to hurt inside. Guru Pathik had said the Air Nomad's love had been reborn as new love... but it was *Gyatso*. "I told him that sounded awful. There had to be *something* somebody could do. But he said no. Forgiveness isn't about them. It's about *you*." He took a deep breath. "What you said - it hurts. A lot. But you've been hurting too, all this time. And when Boots came and found you... you could have left, and we wouldn't know anything. But you didn't. You came to help us. Even... even when you thought I'd hate you." He bit his lip. "And you knew what Roku did when he stopped Sozin the first time. You know what an Avatar can do when... when we get mad." He swallowed dryly. "You're really brave."

Tao raised a brow. "Because I dared to face you?"

"No," Aang said, thinking it over. "Because you didn't stop hoping." He looked at Katara, and her wonder made his heart beat faster. "It takes a lot of courage not to give up."

Toph grinned. Sokka gave him a thumbs-up, and shot Tao a considering look. "So you were around

before Aang was born, huh? What was that like?"

Tao looked thoroughly nonplussed. "You need instruction in the ways of the spirits..."

"Yeah, that too," Aang agreed. "But I need to fix the world." He flung his hands wide. "How'm I gonna do that if nobody tells me about how it *should* be?"

"Hmm." Tao stroked his beard. "Well. My mother was displaced by the invasion, you understand; Fire Lord Sozin might have been forced to withdraw, but she'd already decided the yin and yang of that site were hopelessly unfavorable for her. So I was born at Taku, in the great school of herbalists..."

Leaning back, Aang got ready to do one of the hardest things in his life.

He sat still, and listened.

Chapter End Notes

Duo Qang - sentimental, full of emotion. Found in a book about Tang dynasty poetry.

To answer a few reviewer questions: canon, there are cats in the Avatar 'verse. And displacement is what lets a metal ship float... or a train with curved "wings" of ice sheathing, shaped to displace enough water to equal the mass of the train, so the lake buoys the train up. Zuko's been on a steel ship for three years. He would know how that works.

And yes, I do read reviews. In detail. *G* I just have a definite plot for the story already. (And I'm up to my eyebrows in classes, so finding time to reply is taking distinct second place to just writing the story. Darn it.)

For whoever put the long entry mentioning WWI on the Just Bugs Me Embers tropes page, about the mess and sticky moral situations of trying to clean up after a war - yay! That was cool! "When people play catch with Idiot Ball", indeed. Exactly. And BTW, a lot of your speculations about the Air Nomads are correct.

Finally, a note on those who've commented on the differences between the concept of "For Want of a Nail" and AU... part of the problem is, when I started writing this story, I didn't intend it to be nearly as AU as it turned out. But then I got into researching exactly what sparks off genocides in RL, and what usually has to happen first. And then wondered about why water was the only healing element, and how that might be balanced if all the elements are supposed to be necessary to the world's balance. And then the bunnies tied together Koh, and Wan Shi Tong, and a few other things...

It, um, kind of snowballed from there. Sorry.

At least now I have a fairly good idea of all the backstory for this AU. And it is drastically AU. No question.

Chapter 38

We have to move. Azula packed with grim efficiency, mind racing down a dozen different paths to rebuild her plans from the impossible wreck Zuko had made of things. *We have to move now.*

"Azula? What's wrong?" Across their palace room, Ty Lee stopped fussing over a pair of Kyoshi Warrior outfits, finally satisfied with the way she'd laid them on top of each other. Smiling, she rolled them up as neatly as a backflip. "You're okay, and I'm okay, and the city's safe-"

"I don't have a body," Azula cut her off. Eyed the roll of dark and lighter green. "Why are you taking Mai's uniform?"

"Well, she might want it, if we run into her again," Ty Lee said honestly. "There's room in the tank, right?" She frowned a little. "And you can't have a body if Zuko's still alive."

"It's not his body I'm worried about," Azula said grimly. Though yes, that made her angry, so unbelievably angry...

You're supposed to be dead, Zuzu. You're supposed to be dead, I tricked you into killing yourself, I'm not supposed to fail!

And she couldn't fail, she *couldn't*. Her jaw was clenched and her heart was beating fast and the pit inside her was yawning and dark and full of screams, she had to have the Fire Lord's approval, she *had* to, she'd claw her way over the bodies of the dead and dying to crawl ahead of that gnawing hole eating her alive...

Quiet. Quiet inside her mind, just outside panic's reach.

I... don't understand.

She'd failed. Failed the Fire Lord. Failed her father. The pit should be coming for her. She should be screaming. Better yet, making someone else scream. It was the only way to stave off the gaping collapse, the pit in her heart where everything froze and shattered.

But it was so *quiet* inside.

Azula heard a thump, and realized her hand was empty of... whatever she'd just been packing. And Ty Lee was in front of her, gray eyes wide and worried, easing her back to sit on a bed. "What's wrong?"

"What did she do to me?" Azula whispered. "What did that water-witch *do*?"

Ty Lee gulped. "She said she'd heal you. Because that's what Zuko would have wanted."

Zuko loves you.

A lie. It *had* to be a lie-

There. There was the pit, aching in her soul, she could feel it...

It didn't hurt.

Ached, yes; like a training sear, not yet tended. But the screams...

The screams were just whispers, tainting a quiet wind. The cold was just - cold.

"I promised I'd protect you."

Her brother's voice, wrapped around Amaya's touch until she couldn't tell them apart. Warming her, like turning the corner in knife-sharp winter peaks to find a fire laid and waiting.

The storm still howled inside her. She could feel it. But Amaya had built a bulwark against the pit. A refuge; firm ground that would not crumble even though she could *feel* the emptiness trying to devour her still...

Only a fool turned down shelter, even from her enemies. And it was so... *quiet*.

I failed Father. I failed the Fire Lord. But I'm still here.

Azula breathed, tasting the air as the impossible became *real*.

I'm still here. And so long as I still breathe, I defend our nation.

And she would. She *would*. And the first step in that was... "We have to get you out of here," Azula said abruptly. "I doubt anyone was close enough to see much of the fight. Still, if word gets back to my father you're an airbender-"

"...I think he knows." Ty Lee gave her a brave smile. "I remembered a few things. After the train."

"Things?" Azula repeated warily.

"Just some things that might come in handy," Ty Lee shrugged. "Don't worry so much! I won't get executed if I don't do anything obvious. So I won't." A cheeky grin. "And you're always good at explaining things. I'll be fine."

Trust. From an airbender. Somehow, the irony wasn't nearly as funny as it should have been. "So Father knows," Azula murmured. And that called for long and careful thought. "Do you really think Zuko cares what happens to me?"

"Of course he does," the acrobat nodded. "You're the heir! If the Fire Nation lost you - well, it'd be just awful."

The classic answer. The correct one.

Yet when it came to Zuko, the classic answer seemed entirely wrong.

Zuko loves you.

Everyone she knew used love as a tool, a means of manipulation. Even Zuko, mentioning Ursa... but then, she could actually respect him for that. What soldier worth the name didn't try to shake his opponent's nerve?

Though Agent Shirong's tactics - that man needed a *lesson*.

Never taunt a dragon. You're flammable.

Still. When pushed to the limit Zuko would use even love against her, but he was far more likely to use it as a tool against himself. That fool's quest for Father, and now-

And now, what?

If Zuko wanted her as heir, weakening her hold on Ba Sing Se with that explosive flight was entirely counterproductive. And yes, Zuko *was* capable of screwing up by the numbers, but if he'd been part of Iroh's plan, the old man should have calculated a way to rein in the worst of it.

Not that Iroh was likely to want her as heir. But idiotic as Zuko was in regard to the rest of their happy little family, he had no trouble seeing Uncle for the man he was: smart, but lazy, and broken by Lu Ten's death from the truth of the Fire Nation's glory. Zuko knew, better than anyone else, Iroh did *not* want her as crown princess. If he were wrapped up in one of Iroh's plans, and he did mean her well, he'd do his best to wreck anything that meant to harm her.

Which left one of two options. Either that crazy battle had been Zuko's attempt to mangle one of Iroh's plans for just that purpose... or the damage to the Fire Nation's status as irresistible overlords was completely secondary.

"Which would mean he did all that to get refugees and traitors out of Ba Sing Se," Azula said, half to herself. Mentally she went back over the report Master Sergeant Yakume had proffered to her Dai Li, of everything the loyalists had seen and heard before Jee had gleefully dropped them off the ship. She could ignore the bit about ice; there'd been a spirit involved and everyone knew how perverse they were. But there were bits of gold among the dross. "The traitors were all close to the waterbender. Even if Uncle does seem impressed with her - ugh! - it doesn't make..."

Words died in her throat, and Azula suppressed a very ignoble desire to *eep*.

He wouldn't. He couldn't.

But this *was* Iroh, who had a very un-Fire Nation interest in the so-called balance of the elements. Who was still younger than Azulon had been when Ozai was born. And all the information she had on Amaya and "Mushi" definitely suggested...

Eww!

Yet it fit, curse the man. He was *manipulative*. And Zuko wanted to protect her, and the Fire Nation. And both of them thought the fate of her as heir would be one of the most dangerous things that could happen to the empire, short of no heir at all.

But if there were another heir, if Iroh's line was alive again...

"Are you okay?" Ty Lee asked in a small voice. "You don't look so good."

Azula tried to speak. Swallowed, and tried again. "My uncle's sense of humor," she got through gritted teeth, "deserves to be *boiled*. And shot through the heart. And boiled *again*. In lava."

"Um. Yikes?" Ty Lee blinked. "What was the joke?"

"It's... complicated." And yet so simple. Right in front of her nose. Transport. People of all walks of life, now personally indebted to Iroh for their safety. Colony supplies. And, it seemed, the Earth King's own agreement behind her Dai Li's loyalty. Meaning he expected to gain something considerable out of the whole mess.

Fracture the Fire Nation in a civil war? Agni, what couldn't the Earth King get out of that?

I have to do something-

Stop, Azula told herself forcefully. *Think*.

None of her tutors had ever covered the possibility of a civil war. It just wouldn't happen.

But it's going to, Azula realized. It fits. Uncle hates what we are, hates the empire. He'll destroy it. And Zuko, that idiot...

No. Not an idiot. Not if he'd seen this coming first. Though why was he going along with Uncle, Zuko didn't want to see their own people destroyed! Spirits, he'd even gone out of his way to save traitors-

Her hand clenched on the sheets, as Azula fit the pieces together.

Assume the Avatar is alive.

Assume he and his little band are going to follow some form of the Water brats' plan, and attack on the eclipse. With an Avatar's power behind them.

Assume they might - just might - succeed.

Which was not something she wanted to think about. Ever. Leaving aside the indignity of being threatened by barbarians, she knew enough of what the Fire Nation had done to the rest of the world to guess what Earth and Water would do to them. Hunted, hounded, *obliterated*.

Though... not all. If the government crumbled, the domains would be forced to fall back on their own resources. Most of the nation would be lost, yes - but Byakko would break the teeth of any force that tried to land. And if the Avatar tried to take them...

Azula smiled, recalling what she'd read in crypts under the palace. Avatar Roku had faced a volcano. And that had been a nice, *tame* one, compared to the White Tiger.

So. The odds were that something of the Fire Nation would endure. At least long enough for whatever plan Iroh had to get off the ground.

A colony. With the Earth King's permission. Azula nodded to herself, recalling history. *And no Avatar crosses the Earth King lightly. It could work.*

It could also cause a civil war, if Iroh was bent on reestablishing his line. But if the Avatar had gotten that far, a civil war would be the least of their worries.

"It could even be an advantage," Azula murmured, mind racing. "The airbender's such a naive little boy. He wants to believe not everyone's guilty. That someone can be *saved*."

And the longer Avatar Aang hesitated, the more time they could buy. And with time, and assassins... Azula smirked.

Then all we'd have to do is make sure we have all the Southern waterbenders in our custody. So we can raise their children... and the next Avatar.

Not that she had any intention of letting matters get that far out of hand. She was the Fire Princess.

But leave it to a bender with no luck at all to plan for the worst.

No. That was silly. Zuko *couldn't* have planned this.

Azula tamped down a flare of contempt with iron control. *It doesn't matter whose plan it is. It'll make the Avatar hesitate. And... we might need that.*

She knew, as most of the Fire Nation did not, exactly how much damage the Avatar had done at the North Pole. Jee hadn't been promoted to captain, even of a mere supply ship, because he deserved the rank. No; there simply weren't enough experienced naval officers left to beach one for potential rebellious sentiment. Not when Jee had never actually *done* anything.

Not until now.

Her nation was still a force to be reckoned with. Still the finest navy, army, and soldiers in the world.

But there were far *fewer* of them, now.

We have to win. We have to. Chase the Avatar, ha - this isn't about honor anymore. This is about survival.

I have to assume those men aren't lying. That the Avatar is alive.

Given that, chasing after Zuko to *deal* with him, no matter how much he deserved it - was it really the best plan? No matter *how* much she'd earned it?

No, Azula decided, bitter as gall. *No, it isn't.*

But leaving was a good plan, if she wanted to be sure Ty Lee was safe. All it would take would be one overzealous spy reporting back to the Fire Lord, and... well. Fire Lord Ozai might know Ty Lee's people were of Air. But knowing and being forced to admit it were two lethally different things.

Ty Lee's too valuable to lose. Our forces are weakened enough already. And I want her family. I am the heir. The onmitsu should answer to me.

So. She was leaving, and leaving fast, though it wouldn't do to look as if she'd been goaded into panicked flight-

Or would it?

Ty Lee's eyes went wide. "Oh, you have an idea!"

Azula chuckled, amused by the sparkle in gray eyes. "Summon Agent Chan, would you?"

One packed chest later, the Dai Li was bowing before her. "Princess. How may we serve?"

"I need you to select an escort for me." Azula let sincerity ring through her voice. "Not so many that it weakens your forces, but if I am to prevent Ba Sing Se's case for a light hand to the Fire Lord - you know how many arrogant generals the Wall has thwarted. I intend to make it very clear to them that you are part of our empire, and will be respected accordingly."

"You mean to leave us?"

Agni, the man actually looked stricken. "Only for a while," Azula said firmly. Really, it wouldn't be efficient to rule the whole world from the capital's caldera. Why not make a second bastion here? The Dai Li were so refreshingly bloodthirsty.

And we'll need trustworthy men for all those new widows back home. Yes; that would work very nicely.

"Honestly, Agent Chan? I find the reports of the incident in the audience chamber disturbing,"

Azula said smoothly. "If the information is correct, that spirit should not have appeared while the city's true overlord was in residence. And that overlord is me." She bent her head, just the slightest touch of noble humility. "The answer is clear. My brother's treachery must be formally recognized, and I must be confirmed as crown princess by my father's decree, before our ancestors and Agni's eternal flame. Then your spirits will be pacified, and Ba Sing Se will flourish."

Which should give me enough time to drag Fire Sages here to catch that thing and fry it to ashes.

"An escort." Chan inclined his head. "It will be difficult to find enough capable of defeating Agent Shirong-

"Pursuing Agent Shirong, or my brother, brings no advantage to any of us at this time."

Under the shade of the green hat, one brow inched up.

"My brother is many things, but he's never been persuasive," Azula said dryly. "If Agent Shirong is following him, given what I know about the Dai Li, he must genuinely believe that stunt of Zuko's was meant to help your people." She rolled her eyes slightly. "Though if Zuko meant to help, we could have worked out something far more subtle... well. It's done. And honestly, he's made all our lives easier." She waved her hand gracefully, as if offering the city. "Any would-be troublemakers will be easy to spot. They'll be talking about nothing else."

"They already are," the agent murmured, a slight smile shadowing his own face before fading back to sober attention. "I would never mean to offend, Princess, but... you *do* want him dead."

Unspoken she could hear, *aren't you going to try to kill him now, after he's humiliated you?*

Azula drew a controlled breath, quelling the urge to fry the agent on the spot. He hadn't actually *said* it.

Yet.

"That was a matter of succession," Azula said, aware of Ty Lee's hopeful gaze. "Before, he was just a fugitive with a price on his head. Now he *is* a traitor, by his own words, and I am the rightful heir. Which I believe your spirits will understand, once the Fire Lord formally acknowledges me." She shrugged. "If the world chooses to see mercy as weakness, that's too bad for the world, isn't it?"

All true. She didn't need to kill Zuko. Not yet.

Iroh was another matter. One she didn't intend to bring up now, with Ty Lee all but cartwheeling for joy, barely waiting for Agent Chan to leave before she hugged Azula hard enough to bruise.

"I'm so glad!" Ty Lee pulled back, eyes bright with unshed tears. "Even if you don't want to be like him, family shouldn't destroy each other."

"What is a clan, if its members can't rely on that?" Azula smiled back. "How is your family, by the way? I believe I'd like to send them a letter."

Use the eclipse, will you, Water boy? Use our power and pride against us, in that black horror when we cannot bend? We'll see about that.

And once the Avatar was dealt with...

We won't need to suffer traitors anymore.

Not even the children.

"Cousin Lee!"

You know, Zuko thought, prying Jinhai away from the sorest spots, *I'm not really sure I like kids.*

Kuzon had loved them. But then, Kuzon hadn't had a younger sister bent on doing him grievous bodily harm with malice aforethought, afterthought, and any other time she had available. Much less every other adult in reach either looking the other way or cheering her on. Tended to sour you on the whole "oh, little kid, cute" deal.

He didn't do it on purpose. I think. "Sore," Zuko gritted out, grateful Meixiang was there to pull her son off. Even more grateful that Lim and Daiyu hadn't jumped in, taking their cue from Huojin's slight frown and Luli's headshake. "Master Amaya says I have to take it easy."

"...Oh." Jinhai frowned, almost as shadowed as this lamp-lit corner of the hold. Sailors and civilians had done their best to partition space up with supplies for families to have a little privacy, but it was far more cramped than the cave had been. Though even crammed together, the Wens and Huojin's family seemed to be making the best of it.

Shadows flickered, deepening Jinhai's young scowl. "When Amaya fixes you, you're *supposed* to get better!"

"He's trying," Huojin said wryly. "Some things just take longer." His slight smile faded. "You had us worried."

"I had *me* worried," Zuko muttered. "It worked." He looked over the mingled group. *Shirong's not here. I need to talk to him.*

Mai wasn't here either, though that was understandable. Apparently Private Fushi, of Lieutenant Teruko's squad, had offered to share her quarters so the Wens wouldn't need to encourage any impropriety until everyone was sure if Min and Mai were to have an understanding. Or not. And one of Fushi's squad-mates was supposed to be *very* good with knives. Zuko could only imagine the kind of shop-talk going on.

I wonder if Min does?

He hoped so. And that they both took things *very* slowly. Maybe it was selfish, but... Mai *had* been a friend, years ago. And he had enough problems thinking about Uncle and Amaya *in the same cabin* without wishing he could throw his brain in a laundry tub.

First things first. Zuko tried for a smile. "How are you holding up?"

"It's crowded," Jia spoke up. "Everyone's been nice, which is strange - well, I guess it's not strange because they're *your* firebenders, but..." She shifted her shoulders, obviously unwilling to be too impolite. "You used to live on this ship?"

"Not this one. The *Wani*. She was smaller. A lot smaller," Zuko answered. "But there were only about thirty of us on board, so..." Oh well. No sugar-coating it. "Ships are always crowded. We're going to make as much speed as we can, and we'll put in to shore sometimes if it's safe, but it's going to be a few weeks before we can stay on solid ground." *If we can.* Zuko drew a breath, and glanced at Tingzhe. "Professor. Captain Jee says you're helping us keep an eye on all the earthbenders. I don't want anyone... getting hurt." He braced himself, and looked Min in the eye. "Are you okay? Being shut away from your element, it's..."

"A really awful way to die," Min managed, looking right back. "Your sister, she's-" He spread his hands, unable to voice the horror.

"She's a dark dragon," Zuko acknowledged. "They happen, sometimes. People who just aren't..." He winced. "I don't know if this helps. Probably not. But it wasn't anything you did, Min. You were just *there*. She's like that. With anyone she thinks she can use." *Use up, burn up, toss aside like gray ashes...*

"And she's our cousin." Min looked ill.

...Of course, that *might* just be seasickness.

"She is," Zuko nodded. "On Roku's side of the family. The *human* side." His smile was wry; he didn't try to soften it. "The crazy comes from Makoto. And she's not perched in your family tree."

...And that was a whole new swarm of flutter-hornets loose in his stomach. *Oh Agni. What does Shidan think of me? He agreed to let Ursa go, he knew the risks if we didn't...*

Shidan's own grandchildren had the blood of the darkest of dragons in their veins. No wonder he'd never tried to see them.

No. No, you know he's not like that!

He'd known Shidan *then*. It'd been eighteen years. Who knew what had changed?

Huojin gave him a pointed look. "Are you okay?"

"I'm tired," Zuko admitted. *My best friend - Kuzon's best friend - might think I'm a monster. And Uncle... who knows what he thinks I am.*

I should never have remembered. It's just not right.

He never should have remembered more than hints; shadows of *this is familiar*. Granted, he didn't know the specifics of Agni's offer; what mortal soul could remember the land of the dead? But he was pretty sure there had been a mention of deadly danger, and a promise of weapons left ready to hand. If, and *only* if, he had need of them.

I was dead, again. In the spirit world, again. And Yue put her claim on me.

Which had probably been the utter, absolute last straw. Agni might want the Fire Lords' hold broken more than anyone, but leaving *Azula* as heir?

Zuko hid a wince, picturing a dragon of pure fire, coiled on himself in endless knots, biting his own tail to keep from setting every volcano ablaze with sheer, unholy *rage*.

Which would be just what Koh wanted.

Tired didn't even begin to cover it. *Terrified* came closer.

But inflicting his own near-panic on a ship full of terrified civilians would be a *bad idea*.

You're in command. Act like it.

Meaning deep breath, look them straight in the eye, and keep them focused on what *they* could do. "Is there anything people really need? I - um - hope the privacy screens are enough, I know ship-scrubs aren't as polite as a bathhouse..."

Suyin gave a kind of strangled laugh. "That's kind of... yeah. You grew up doing this?"

"No," Zuko shrugged. "We don't bring children on warships. Though fishing fleets sometimes have whole families on board." He glanced at the adults. "Is there anything else we can do?"

Which unleashed a slow flood of questions, comments, and startled observations, just as he'd hoped. And at the end of it, he didn't have to pretend to be getting too tired to talk.

Though there was one thing he wasn't about to leave unsaid. "You and your parents should talk to Uncle and Captain Jee about your training, for a while," Zuko told Jinhai seriously. Looked up at Tingzhe. "I know he looks stern, but Captain Jee's a father too. We were sparring partners, until Admiral Zhao commandeered my crew and blew up the *Wani*."

Silence. Full of staring eyes.

What did I say this time-? Oh. "Captain Jee intends to stay under my authority, and we're going to steer clear of admirals," Zuko shrugged. "We're not going to lose another crew to someone else's ship."

More silence. Broken by Huojin's groan as he buried his head in his hands, and Meixiang's rueful chuckle. "People don't blow up noble residences in the Earth Kingdom, my lord," she informed him. "Attack them, yes; that's why all nobles have guards. But to destroy sheltering walls? It's not done."

"Oh." Not that Zuko had thought of the *Wani* as sheltering, after three years trapped on board. Still, it had hurt to see her broken.

But a ship is just a ship. Walls are just walls. You use them to protect your people, and if they can't do that, you leave them behind. Let your enemy waste his time and resources taking them. Use that time to find a way to strike his heart...

So many differences. So much that looked like common ground, and wasn't.

Spirits. Can we make this work? Am I crazy for even trying?

Kuzon wouldn't have tried this, he was sure of it. But then... Kuzon had been sane.

Kuzon thought he had more time. I - don't.

There was a subtle exchange of glances between the adults, and suddenly Huojin was cutting through the crowd to escort him out the door. "Let's get you home before the marines come calling."

Up a few ladders and out into open air, and Huojin gave him a sober look. "All right. What don't you want the kids to know?"

"You think I'd leave *my own people* in the dark?" Zuko tried not to snarl. "You know what we're up against. You know we're all in danger! If you think I'd hide that, that I'd *lie*-!"

"Calm down." Huojin shook his head. "Zuko. Talk to me."

"Why?" Half-step back, balanced stance, breathe. "We've already covered the risks."

"You think the only thing we're worried about is if *we* get hurt?" Huojin bit back an obvious curse. "Damn it, what's wrong?"

I disrespected an ancestor spirit. I've got who knows how many other spirits gunning for me, and if Koh figures out we know what he's up to, he'll throw his power into the scales. And he will figure it out. As long as I didn't know who I was, he had no way to know. But now I do. That could doom us all. I shouldn't be here, I'm risking everyone!

But if there was one thing his family had taught him, it was the value of silence.

"You..." Fuming, Huojin gave him a narrow, angry glare-

Bit back whatever he'd meant to say, suddenly sober. "Zuko. Just - stay right there. Okay? I need - damn it, there's never a Dai Li when you need one, where the heck is he?"

Mute, Zuko gestured toward the stern of the ship. Where else would a firebender in training be?

"Remember," Captain Jee instructed the agent, the wind of *Suzuran's* passage ruffling short gray hair. "Firebending comes from the breath, not the muscle. There's no need to knock a wall down if you can burn through it." He paused. "No offense."

"None taken," Shirong said wryly. "Dai Li knock walls down if we have to; you saw the Wall at Ba Sing Se. But we're not Army benders. We're trained to work on a smaller scale." He breathed out, cupping flame in his palm. And watched the captain's expression, trying to gauge a man who'd known Zuko long before he had. "You're surprised."

"You are an earthbender," Jee pointed out. "You're not?"

"Continually," Shirong admitted. "It shouldn't make this much sense. I've studied your people for years, certainly, but this..." He breathed out gently, snuffing the flame. "Still. You are surprised."

"Who wouldn't be?" Jee studied him right back. "You haven't had much time for instruction. And while General Iroh may be a good teacher, we're both only human."

Mostly, Shirong thought, recalling the details he'd managed to pry out of Teruko the past day. *Dragons. You believe every firebender has the blood of dragons.*

Which, oddly enough, made him feel a bit better about how utterly *bizarre* the Fire Nation sometimes seemed. Violent and ruthless and bound by iron codes of honor anyone else would just laugh off... and yet, tight-knit and protective as a pygmy puma with kittens. The *good* ones, anyway.

They believe they're different from the rest of the world. And they're right.

A belief Sozin must have found all too easy to twist over time, Shirong realized. They weren't *better* than anyone else. But different? Absolutely.

Of course, it helped that he actually liked pygmy pumas. Vicious habits and all.

But in some things, they weren't as different as they liked to think. "It's not General Iroh's teaching you were worried about, was it?" Shirong asked.

Jee cleared his throat. "Ah... no."

Aha. "He's really that bad?" Shirong raised a curious brow.

Jee gave him a dark frown. Then, reluctantly, sighed. "He could use more tactical training, but Prince Zuko is good enough to be in my marines. And that healing fire is an incredible asset. It's

even settled Lieutenant Sadao down, and I was beginning to wonder if anything would... well." He shrugged. "General Iroh's had the prince for three years, and I could still take him in a sparring match. It's - well, it's not what you would expect, from that bloodline."

"I see," Shirong murmured. And was afraid he did. *It was never enough to be just good, was it? You had to be phenomenal.*

"Though we haven't really had the chance for a bout, since he... managed to free *Suzuran*." Jee shook himself. "I know the theory behind fighting waterbenders, but I haven't been able to bring myself to apply it. Even if he weren't on the casualty list. He's the Fire Lord's *son*. Water in his hands is just... wrong."

"Hmm."

Jee regarded him narrowly. "You don't think so."

"I met him as Amaya's apprentice," Shirong stated. "I knew when I saw him he might be a war-child; I didn't realize he was Fire Nation until later. Much less a firebender. As for *who* he was..." The agent chuckled. "We're lucky we were running for our lives at the time, or I might have done something stupid."

"Amaya's apprentice." Jee frowned. "I had the impression Dai Li weren't easily fooled."

"He worked very hard." Shirong half-closed his eyes a moment, sorting the difference in feel between the heat of metal under earth-clad feet, and the ship's faint, almost unreachable touch of earth. *Surrounded by water, and I'm perfectly sane. How very odd.* "And he's creative."

"Creative."

One word, that held years of implications. Shirong gave him a sharp look.

Jee covered a cough. "Well, he's always been inventive when it comes to getting past security. Zhao found that out the hard way."

"But Azula's the master, hmm?" Shirong mused. "I've seen them fight. If he could bring himself to kill her, she *would* be dead. He's *good*, Captain." He smiled wryly. "He's just not good at *this style*."

The way Jee's face settled into polite neutrality was painful to watch. *You've seen him train, and you don't believe me*, Shirong judged. *But you're not about to start an argument, because you're certain that as soon as Zuko heals enough to be sparring again, I can judge for myself.*

I think you're going to be very surprised.

And there really was no point in arguing. Not until Zuko could surprise him properly. Though if this was the impression the young man had left on his crew, Shirong couldn't grasp quite why Jee had chosen to risk his ship and life following the prince.

Then again, perhaps what he'd followed was Zuko's *plan*, not his bending. Bending skill and strategic genius didn't always go hand in hand. Just look at Ba Sing Se's generals-

Green wove around knots of red and gray, and Shirong straightened. "Huojin. What's wrong?"

"I asked Zuko to stay put." Huojin gestured forward. "Go talk to him. Fast."

Jee tensed. "Is the ship in danger?"

"The ship, no. Us, no. And the way you even ask that-" Huojin looked skyward, shaking his head. "I know he's a great name. I know you all think thirteen's old enough to walk into an arena and die. But right now he's wound up tighter than he was when I met him on the Ba Sing Se docks, which makes me think that maybe, just *maybe*, his sister trying to kill him *again* might have been a *bit much*."

To his credit, Jee winced. "I'll inform the general-"

"No offense," Huojin growled, "but I thought we might try someone who hasn't got him convinced the important part of getting his ship blown up was Zhao walking off with his crew."

"Ships can be replaced," Jee said sternly. "People can't."

Shirong cleared his throat. "I take it this was the ship that blew up while he was still on it?"

"Yes," Jee nodded. "I thought for months he was dead, General Iroh was very convincing- Where are you going?"

"To tell a young man he's *at least* as important as his crew," Shirong shot back over his shoulder. "Tell *the general* whatever you like."

I didn't know. I wish I'd known.

But Zuko had at least as much common sense and will to live as he'd thought, because when Shirong got to the section of rail the young man had claimed, Zuko was still there. Even if the cold expression on his face had every sailor in sight giving him as wide a berth as possible.

Which is a lot less room than I would have imagined, Shirong reflected, watching sailors watch him settle his hands on the rail near the prince. "No wonder you're such private people."

Zuko twitched.

Aha. That got his attention. "We're stacked up on top of each other in Ba Sing Se, but there's always somewhere else to go," Shirong went on, watching out of the corner of his eye as an infinitesimal bit of tension eased out of taut shoulders. "If you have an argument, or fall in love, or your heart is broken - you can always find somewhere else to go. Someone else to talk to. And odds are, you can tell them anything, because you've never seen them before and you'll never see them again. Here," he waved a hand at the water. "Where else is there to go? Your privacy isn't walls and streets. It's silence, and customs, and formality. If you're doing what everyone expects, who knows what you really think?"

"Kuzon would have adopted you," Zuko said, half to himself.

Which was so not what Shirong had expected, he had to blink. "What?" *No, that doesn't sound right.* "Why?"

"He had a knack for finding people who didn't fit," Zuko shrugged. "Sometimes all they needed was a purpose, and those were the ones he usually left in place. Sometimes they wanted something different, and he'd get them to the colonies, or another part of the Earth Kingdom, or... other places. And sometimes..." He glanced down into white, rushing foam. "Some things, even healing fire can't fix. Ran only ever had one daughter. And she loved children. If he'd found you before the Dai Li did, he'd have brought you home."

"Earthbender," Shirong pointed out, feeling the world decidedly askew. "I doubt I would have gone."

Zuko smiled bitterly. "What makes you think he would have asked?"

Shirong's eyes narrowed. *It's worse than Huojin thinks. If not why Huojin thinks.* "He would have. You would have."

"Kuzon thought he was right, most of the time," Zuko shot back. "It got him killed."

Something about the way Zuko tensed when he said that... "You remember that?" Shirong asked.

"Every second," Zuko said quietly. "You'd think I could remember the good things. The Southern Air Temple. Learning to bend with Uncle Kuroyama, and Shidan. Raising a daughter. Raising *granddaughters*." He snorted. "I should know better."

Shirong frowned. "I was told you remembered him."

"Like a washed-out painting," Zuko muttered. "Like reading a court transcript, instead of being there. I know what happened. I know *why*. I know he loved them all so much..." Hands gripped the rail, white-knuckled. "I know it. But all I can *feel* is that night. When Azulon finally decided to stop playing games." He swallowed. "Aang thinks Kuzon never killed his people. How can I tell him he's wrong?"

This is very bad. "Tell me," Shirong said gently.

Gold eyes were shadowed. "It was night, and it was raining..."

I was wrong, Shirong reflected. *It's worse.* And if he ever got his hands on whatever spirit or combination of spirits was responsible... well, *someone* deserved their heads cracked together. "You haven't spoken to your uncle about this?"

"I *can't*."

The pain he'd expected, but not the desperation. "Why not?" Shirong asked.

"What do you know about vendetta?"

Enough to know you're all bloody-minded enough to be dragons. "A man does not live under the same sky as his father's..." Shirong's voice trailed off. *Oh, damn.*

"Azulon had Kuzon assassinated," Zuko said bluntly. "He was the Fire Lord. He had every right to charge a domain's lord with treason and conspiracy and have him executed. But he *didn't*. He never charged Kuzon with anything. He gave him no chance for an Agni Kai. *None*."

"Which means... it *could* be considered murder." Shirong felt ice in his veins.

"I know it. You know it. Uncle knows it," Zuko bit out. "But *he* doesn't have proof. I do." He took a breath. "Azulon had Kuzon killed. And then, eleven years later, he ordered Ozai to kill me. To atone for *insulting* Iroh's loss of his own heir."

Shirong felt faint. "Your *grandfather*-"

"And my mother killed him."

With an effort, Shirong stepped away from his horror, trying to see where the ungodly mess of Fire Nation loyalties led. "Oh... damn."

"Deception is an acceptable part of vendetta," Zuko said, cold as winter. "I'd bet you gold Uncle's wondering right now whether Kuzon saw the assassination coming. And if Byakko accepted the betrothal offer just to get her close to Azulon."

"Did he?" Shirong asked, numbly fascinated.

Zuko gave him a level look. "I'm not going to hand you something Uncle wants to get out of you."

"How kind," Shirong said dryly.

"I can't talk to Uncle about this," Zuko said wearily. "I just... can't. Because if I do - if I do, he'll be sure. And as long as he's not sure..."

"Your mother's safe," Shirong finished. "Where is your mother?" A Fire Lord's killer; spirits, where in the world would be safe for her?

"I *don't* know."

Shirong winced at that pain. "But you think she is alive."

"I don't know." Zuko shook his head. "She woke me up in the middle of the night, told me she'd done it to protect me... and when I got up the next morning, she was gone. And no one would tell me anything. My father... he just smiled." His voice dropped. "You've seen how Azula smiles."

Arrogant, insane, *I'm going to kill you and you're going to scream every minute of it*. Oh yes. "Amaya's your teacher-"

"She's sharing quarters with Uncle."

And was evidently *not an option*, by that flat tone. *I can't say I'm surprised*, Shirong thought sadly. *You have no idea how to deal with people who aren't hurting each other, do you?*

"I know... I *know* I need to sort all this out. Before I - hurt someone," Zuko said faintly. "And you know spirits, and you know how much my family's messed up, and... you were the only one I could think of. Because I'm *not Kuzon*." He drew a shaky breath. "But... I don't know how to tell Uncle that."

"Because Kuzon was his father's spy, and his father's enemy... and then, his father's victim," Shirong nodded. "And you almost were as well."

"...Yes."

"And it's worse than that, because he's failed you twice," Shirong reflected. "In Kuzon's life, by not throwing his support to someone trying desperately to derail the Fire Nation's conquest. And in this life, by teaching you that you could never be a match for your sister."

"I'm *not*." Zuko looked away. "She's good, Shirong. She's the *best*. Kuzon was ninety-seven, he was a *master*, and *he* couldn't have taken her-!"

"Are you sure?" Shirong cut across his denial. "She never saw that hot sand coming."

"I..." Zuko shook his head, still unwilling to look his way. "Kuzon... didn't know how to do that."

"He didn't," Shirong murmured, sensing a chance of victory nearing.

"No," Zuko said quietly. "He knew healing fire, and he knew enough airbenders to figure out you

could use burning leaves to move a little wind, but... no." A faint shadow of a smile. "I owe Toph. A lot."

Well, there's one earthbender who's left a mark, Shirong thought, amused. And relieved. Good. Toph is here and now. Not the past. If I can just nudge him a bit more that way... "So the Blind Bandit's as good as they say?"

"Better." And that was a smile, wry and tired as it might be. "She's... benders move their element. But Toph - she moves, and the world moves *with* her." Zuko shook his head. "They say Omashu's king earns his throne because he's the strongest earthbender. If Bumi ever gets around to dying, I *know* who's going to get the job."

Guanyin have mercy, we actually have a human being here. Shirong stifled a laugh. *And I thought Teruko was exaggerating.* After all - a firebender, thinking an earthbender was *cute*?

"What?" Zuko said warily.

Is he-? He is. Shirong bit back a delighted chuckle. It was just a little pink, but the prince was definitely not thinking about death at the moment. "Hmm. I was just wondering how much information we might have on the Bei Fong family. Merchant contacts could be considerably helpful in pulling all of this off. And they might be much more than that for Lady Bei Fong and her allies-"

"We can set up a back door," Zuko said in a rush. Let go of the railing, and paced, thinking hard. "If they use what I gave Katara they can get into the Fire Nation, and if they'd just keep their heads down... But they never do. They're *always* in trouble. And flying with Appa is just going to bring more of it, they're going to *need* a way to get out..."

Shirong watched, and listened, and sighed with relief. *Good. He's going to be busy... did he just mutter something about genealogies?*

Chapter 39

"I'm going to kill him," Langxue gritted out, tucked up against *Nami no Kizu's* rail in as much shelter as he could find and still be in easy bending range of the river.

"Not if I kill him first," Saoluan muttered, fingering one of the red-fletched arrows still stuck in the railing over his head. Shidan's *borrowed* troop of Yu Yan hadn't quite gotten around to gathering them all up yet. There'd been so *many*.

The dragon himself was stalking the deck with a razor-edged smirk, eyeing the water behind them as if daring Pohuai Stronghold's forces to catch up. For all Saoluan knew, he was waiting for just that.

...And from the look on Langxue's face, she'd muttered *that* bit out loud. "Don't think so," the waterbender told her. "We're making as good time as we can. You know that."

Yeah, she knew; and it was good time. Even so. "Getting shot at isn't what's bothering you," Saoluan said bluntly. "It ought to be, but it isn't." She shot him a piercing look. "So what is?"

"The Yu Yan," Langxue said in a low voice. "They still have Yu Yan."

Hyourin, she thought. "Still? The Fire Nation's always had crazy archers."

"No, they didn't," Langxue said flatly. "Archery... it was an Air Nomad art."

Okay. She was starting to get those odd prickles down her nerves again. "Yeah?"

"Oh, yeah," Langxue said dryly. "You saw Shidan bend that flaming boulder in their faces?"

"Um." Saoluan swallowed, wishing she could forget. She'd seen firebenders make flame do the impossible, sure. Seen earthbenders hollow out a cup of rock to move water, and waterbenders shatter stone with ice. But she'd never, ever seen a firebender move something *with* fire.

Langxue smirked. "Think what an airbender can do with an arrow-storm."

Blinking, she did.

It was terrifying.

"That's what got Avatar Hirata," Langxue said as she shuddered. "Yangchen... it took her a long time to get the whole story. Subodei and Xiangchen, they *knew* who she was. So they had her raised... well. The *yāorén* finally got her loose, so she could find teachers..." He shrugged. "By the time she got to the Fire Nation, they'd been fighting off raids for decades. They figured things out."

"What kind of things?" Saoluan asked warily.

"You don't have to be a bender to move chi," her young friend said, stating the impossible as if it were simple fact. "Sometimes helps if you're not. Benders put chi into their element. Chi-users put it into what they *do*."

Saoluan put together that, and archers, and winds. "You mean..."

"When a Yu Yan shoots, the arrow *keeps going*."

Eeep. "But they missed the Avatar," she argued weakly.

"Ah. But not by much." Shidan stalked to a halt by them, still smirking. He looked Langxue over with lazy golden eyes; an otter-croc too full to be interested in stalking prey. For the moment. "So far as the rest of the world knows, the Air Nomads have always been peaceful and harmless. And you wonder that we still have the weapons we paid for in blood?" He snorted. "We are *not* the rest of the world. Our children are taught in school of the strength of the Air Nomads' army. Of the cruelty of their raiding parties, who pierced the hands of captives in case one might be a hidden bender, and tied them about as living shields against our warriors. Of the sharpness of their katana, which cut the very wind; of the golden armor of their bison, gleaming as they flew at us out of the sun, using Agni's own rays against us."

Saoluan saw red, and almost reached for her sword. "And all of those are lies!"

"But they were not," Shidan bit out, "once."

"He's right." Langxue's voice was small, but it pulled her back from the brink. "I hate it, Saoluan, it's awful... but he's *right*. Some of them weren't like that. There were all kinds of Air tribes, once, and they didn't all like to fight... but a lot of them *did*. I- Hyourin saw it." He winced, and looked away. "He saw it all."

"But they weren't like that," Saoluan got out. Feeling... broken inside. "Not when you killed them. When Sozin-" She cut herself off, shaking.

"No. They were not." Shidan let out a gusting sigh, a predator abandoning the chase. "Nothing excuses what my people have done. Both my peoples; for my birth kin could have risked their lives, and died, defending those of Air. But human wars-" He made an impatient gesture, as if clawing away invisible vines. "I cannot explain it. There is no human explanation that would suit you, I think. For one of dragon's blood to *not* take up weapons, to *not* prepare night and day to slaughter any enemies that would come against them - it is unthinkable. It is - one who does such a thing, who believes the world will *not* be dangerous, will *not* strive to kill him-" He spread empty hands. "That is what we call *insane*. Do you understand?"

Saoluan breathed, trying to cool herself down enough to think. *Oma and Shu, he's really not human*. "Dragons think someone who doesn't want to fight is crazy."

"Dangerously so," Shidan said soberly. "For the bonds of clan mean one *must* assist one's kin. And it is our dangerousness, our peril to each other, that keeps each clan from another's throats. If one member of the clan *will not fight*, and other clans *know* that to be true..."

"They stomp on him, everybody else comes roaring in to fight, and the whole countryside goes up in flames," Langxue summed up.

Shidan inclined his head. "I know that many humans are not like that," he said soberly. "I cannot understand *why*, but I know it is true." He scowled at her, only half playful. "Why must you be so confusing?"

"Why do your people have to be homicidal maniacs?" Saoluan shot back.

He relaxed, and nodded. "You do understand. Good."

"I don't understand anything!"

Shidan flinched. "I had thought... we are *fire*. What else can we be?" He gestured toward the stern, where keen-eyed archers watched the smoke rising behind them. Closer, now; the stronghold's

commander must not have been shy about impressing the need for speed on his commandeered vessel. "What else dare we be, knowing air is air?"

"You have to be ruthless killers because of one little boy who was raised a pacifist," Saoluan said dryly. One Avatar, but why let a little fact like that get in the way of arguing with a dragon?

Shidan eyed her, and sighed. "Fire burns, heals, kills. Air is the zephyr, and the howling tornado. We are what we *are*. No matter what the monks-"

Langxue jerked his head up, tasting the breeze. "Smoke."

"Kind of a given," Saoluan muttered.

"No. Coal smoke." Langxue wove his fingers in the wind. "Upriver. And... oh spirits, someone's burning houses... Shidan? Why are you grinning?"

Chapter 40

The sun was shining, Gaipan was burning, and it was going to be a wonderful day.

Serves those damn collaborators right, Jet thought smugly, touching the bark of the tree he was crouched in for luck. *The flood didn't wash away the trash. We'll just have to burn it out.*

Smellerbee and Longshot were scattered in other trees nearby, also waiting for stragglers, and probably not happy about it. Which was just not fair. He hadn't even started this battle.

Aggravated it, sure. Inflamed it, definitely, since a messenger hawk had arrived days ago and the whole mass of Fire bastards had seemed to split right down the middle. Arguing about domains and healing and *loyalty*, of all things, from what they'd managed to eavesdrop on. Like the Fire Nation would know anything about loyalty.

No. He hadn't *had* to start this one going. And as far as Smellerbee and Longshot knew, he hadn't.

Nice, that the dagger he'd showed Sokka months back had still been in the treetop wreckage. A real Fire assassin's dagger, no matter what that naive Water Tribe kid had thought. It would have been a shame to let it rust on Earth Kingdom soil.

So if it ended up in a lone soldier's back, just outside a house that belonged to a Fire elder making noise about honor... Well, that was just sending it home, right?

Jet listened to screams from Gaipan, and nodded. So Smellerbee and Longshot didn't want to fight for freedom anymore? Fine. He'd just pointed out that they couldn't let soldiers leave Gaipan to spread this fight elsewhere, now could they?

And if there happened to be a few civilians in with them... the traitors deserved it.

And if it works here, I can do it again down the coast - much better than trying to talk that stupid airbender into-

Green and brown and livid red, heading this way. Looked like the townspeople were ahead of the soldiers, which would make his fighters a little easier to live with...

Him.

He knew that face leading the mob, even from this high up. He knew that *scar*.

He got past the Fire Nation besieging Ba Sing Se. He's here. And there are Fire Nation cowards in with those people!

Only one thing could explain all of that.

I was right! You are Fire Nation!

And now he knew, you didn't give a bender time to see you coming.

I should have talked to Uncle.

A mistake. A bad one. Granted, Zuko was all too aware of the other boneheaded, foolhardy stunts he'd pulled over the years. But those had just risked *his* neck. Most of the time.

We should have talked. Before anyone went ashore. Damn it.

But he'd been tired and hurting and utterly out of his depth. What was he supposed to say to Uncle Iroh? *Hey, let's just put all the mutual assassination attempts aside and be family?*

He hadn't - *Kuzon* hadn't - set Ursa in place to assassinate Azulon. He was sure of that. Mostly. But that didn't mean *Shidan* hadn't. The dragon-swordsman knew damn well whose blood ran in Azulon's veins, and he carried a host of grudges of his own. Born in blood, and ashes, and the bones of his winged kin.

And Zuko loved Iroh as his uncle and Shidan as his son and friend and he *couldn't choose*.

Uncle would want him to choose. His whole *family* wanted him to choose: save your sister, be a patsy for your sister, chase the Avatar for the Fire Lord's glory so you're anywhere but here. Uncle's choice was relatively benign... at least, from Iroh's point of view. Choose between the clan, and what was right for the whole Fire Nation. Zuko understood that. He even agreed. Partly.

But Uncle wanted him to *choose*, and he was hurt and tired and *angry*, Agni, *so* angry about Roku. And the lies, the misinformation, the evasions...

Lee could stand them. A little better. You lied to people outside the tribe if you had to, and Uncle obviously didn't think of Ozai as his tribe. And if Iroh had had to lie to him to lie to Ozai-

But he couldn't be Lee. Not on *Suzuran*. Jee's people were under enough strain already. He had to be a commanding officer, not a ragged Earth Kingdom healer.

And if he couldn't be Lee... talking was hard enough when he was sane. Angry and hurt? He didn't want to scream at Uncle.

...Actually, he did. That was the problem.

So he hadn't talked to Uncle. Not really. It hurt too much. He'd just wanted to wait a few days. Just to cool down. To let time wear at the aching rawness of *he lied to me*.

Mistake. Possibly lethal one. Maybe not for him; Zuko had had more soldiers try to kill him than all of Gaipan's garrison put together, and he kind of doubted anyone here was up to marine standards. But the people *with* him...

If we live through this, I'm never sailing with civilians again.

Zuko knew logistics. He *did*. He knew all the fuss and bother and headaches of trying to get a mass of soldiers and sailors from point A to point B without imploding, exploding, or slaughtering each other in the middle of the night. Food, drinking water, little things for morale like - shudder - music night... he *knew* all that.

And Uncle *swore* the attempted mutiny last year hadn't been his fault.

But any way you sliced it, civilians weren't soldiers.

Intellectually, Zuko knew that too. He'd been taught about civilians. All his life. Even if he hadn't ever really dealt with them for more than a few hours at a time outside of court, before Ba Sing Se.

Court, he'd painfully discovered, really didn't count. Civilians were nothing like court. Even the noble civilians, what few they had with them, weren't.

Oh, they were a little like court. They knew about armored manners and knife-sharp words; aside glances to hint instead of say, like onmitsu footsteps in the dark. Jia and her poetry classes were proof of that. But real armor, and knives, and onmitsu? No. That was - and here was what *really* hurt his brain - *scary*.

How just talking about knives could be scarier than not having a good set tucked away for emergencies, Zuko had no idea. But there it was. Weapons scared them. Firebending scared them. His men - Jee's patient, long-suffering, patched-together crew - actually *frightened* the people they were all trying to protect.

Then again, Shirong scared them too. Which made no sense at all. Shirong was a Dai Li, and dangerous? Last time Zuko had checked, that was a Dai Li's *job*.

He'd be tempted to beat his head against a bulkhead, but it wouldn't solve anything. Darn it.

Not that every civilian was a problem. Mai seemed to be making progress charming the more fragile types, especially when she dragged Min along as a proper escort. Tingzhe Wen's family were Agni's own blessing, keeping calm and helping Mai defuse the inevitable clashes between armed Fire, refugee Earth, and Fire that had hidden itself for quiet survival. Luli and Huojin likewise. He wished he had a hundred of them.

But he didn't. And he was responsible for all of these people, and they were scared. They didn't know soldiers, they didn't know ships, and even with rocks on board for the earthbenders, they *really* wanted to get back on dry land. Even if it was just for a little while.

And Uncle had sworn he had contacts in Gaipan, and sending shore parties off the ships for a day would be just *fine*.

Every once in a while, Uncle was wrong.

Zuko wasn't sure what his people had walked into. At this point, he didn't care. The town was insane, at least three different factions seemed to be slitting throats at the same time, and the only sane civilians left in the area had either bolted for the woods or locked themselves in to wait out the bloodshed. Which just went to show that Earth's instinct to stand your ground wiped out even common sense, because there were watermarks *above* some of those rooflines. What kind of insane moron locked himself in on a *floodplain*?

All of which left everyone who'd come ashore scrambling to get the supplies they'd come for and get back to the ships. If anything was left of their plan, Uncle was with Jee's people, handling that. Which was good, because Zuko wanted to be sure there was plenty of calming tea on board when he set something on *fire*.

He'd ended up with Shirong, and a bunch of... spirits, he couldn't even be sure he was coming up with the same numbers of people twice, much less nationalities, as the two of them tried to lead some of the *less* sane civilians in a loop through the edge of the forest that hopefully would take them away from armed troops, back to the river and safety. He hadn't had a chance to ask *why* these people were following him; he could only guess that some had attached themselves to long-lost relatives they'd never hoped to see again-

Earth Kingdom. Mostly.

Some seemed to have grabbed what they could carry and followed *him*, right after he'd raised an ice wall to slow down pursuit-

Fire Nation, and the only waterbenders who've been through here are... yeah. Sokka's responsible for this, somehow. And I'm going to get him for it.

And some - well, given the improvised weapons of farming flails and weirder things, they just seemed to be along for the mayhem. And those were a mix of red and green clothes he had *no* clue how to sort out.

"Sqwark!"

Speaking of mayhem. There was one Fire Nation soldier sincerely regretting rushing ahead of the rest, armor or no armor. "Don't eat him!" Zuko called to Asahi. Grabbed a wrinkled Fire matron who seemed semi-sane, and pointed her toward the river with the formal sweeping gestures of a lord on the battlefield, where yelled orders or temper might steal your voice completely: *lead your people, move them, get them out of my line of fire. Now.* "You don't know where he's been!"

...Okay, that earned him a dirty look he didn't think he deserved. You'd think a sane soldier would be just a little more concerned about the ostrich-horse trying to take his arm off-

Fire!

Breathe, step, block and shove aside; he spared a quick glance toward Shirong, he hadn't felt earth moving to block that fireblast and the Dai Li didn't *have* a hat anymore-

Shirong tossed a few stray flames off his hand to sputter out in wet grass, looking as surprised as anyone.

Zuko grinned.

Green eyes caught that, and narrowed. "In case things somehow manage to get worse," the Dai Li declared, as oncoming troops slowed in shock, "I just want you to know one thing." He drew a deep breath. "A train is *not* a boat!"

Which was almost enough to start Zuko giggling right there, and he was going to have to *talk* to Shirong later about humor and firefights...

Wind whispered through leaves, and Zuko ducked.

You? Again?

A fire-flash of thought, there and gone, because Jet was good. Not as good as he thought he was, but very, *very* good with those hook swords. And hadn't been wounded lately, from the way he moved. And from the whites showing all around his eyes, the sheer thoughtless *fury* the so-called Freedom Fighter slashed out with... he'd utterly, totally lost it.

Spin, parry; he's going low, jump-

No fires to draw off of. This was going to cost him.

Worth it, need to put him down, Shirong can't hold them all off-

Zuko whirled a firestorm around him with steel, blasting Jet back into oncoming spears. Incidentally searing a few arrows out of the wind, and who was shooting at them *now*-?

Water foamed and struck like an octopus, wrapping arms and weapons in a winter-crackle of ice. *"Nobody move!"*

A Kyoshi Warrior? Here?

A warrior whose young waterbender ally hadn't fought the Fire Nation, Zuko realized, wriggling himself free with a breath of steam and finger-twitches to shed melting water. That weave of ice wasn't going to hold long.

"Okay, I give up," the waterbender grumbled, sea-green eyes flicking from Zuko's unruly mob, to Jet, to the soldiers currently straining against ice. "Who are the bad guys?"

Wrapped to his neck in ice, Shirong snickered.

Not that Zuko didn't appreciate the irony, but that choked amusement had drawn the warrior's narrowed eyes, and he really didn't want to try and fight his way past a good swordswoman and a trained waterbender-

"Let them go."

Red and gold and - blue?

Midnight blue mountain-stripes on an old-fashioned lord's haori. The lord himself looked almost white-haired enough to have taken his domain when they were still the fashion, centuries ago; though he moved with the grace of a swordsman in his prime, daisho carried proud and ready-

Shidan!

Fear and hope roiled in Zuko's gut like hurricane waves. Not so much fear for himself, though what Shidan might think of Makoto's great-grandson was enough to give him chills. But if Shidan was here, openly, all of Byakko was in danger.

"Let them go, Langxue," Shidan stated, looking the guards' commander in the eye. "I believe the captain will give his parole so we may talk."

Talk. Right, Langxue thought sourly, figuring out a tricky part-push that would let the guard captain loose without releasing the rest of the spear-carriers. And wincing. He wasn't a master. He was good, but he wasn't that good yet... and his chi ached. He wasn't about to let on to Saoluan, there was nothing she could *do* - but it ached, gnawing at him like a mole-rat, and he was scared.

I'm running out of time.

It would have been easier to just collapse all the water into a tame wave at his feet. A lot easier. But that wasn't what Shidan had asked for. And given the blazing fire of the dragon's presence was keeping the captain from doing something stupid-

Chi plucked at part of his ice, subtly weakening bonds holding that startling green-uniformed firebender frozen.

Another waterbender? Where? There's nobody in blue, or dressed like home... oh.

Earth-green robes, sleeves covered with an odd black tracery that reminded a fisherman's son of waves, and storms, and white fire crawling across the sky. Ragged black hair shaded the teenager's face, but didn't cover the massive scar that almost - *almost* - didn't let you see anything else. Yet if you could look past it-

He has Shidan's eyes.

Reaching out with chi and heart, Langxue felt an echo of the dragon's inner flame, coiling about frightened people to keep them strong. Not the trained inner fire Hyourin remembered; it was too raw, too much the firestorm instead of a tame, civilized burn. But *strong*.

And wrapped around that strength, braiding it together when it frayed, was the tide-pull of family.

It's him. Kaze's cousin. A yāorén.

...I'm going to live.

Langxue swallowed a sudden impulse to cry. He didn't know Shidan's grandson. He didn't know *anything* about the Fire Nation boy, or how he'd gotten an entire navy ship to follow him, much less that ragged fleet they'd seen ranging up the river.

He didn't know... and part of him just didn't *care*. Fire-born or not, this was *another yāorén*. Someone who understood. *Help*.

And those pale gold eyes were fixed on Shidan like the last hold over an abyss.

Beside Langxue, Saoluan choked. "*He's* your-"

"Indeed." Shidan's smile showed just a hint of teeth.

"But he's-!"

"If you truly wish to fight with him over burning one of your villages down, Warrior..." Shidan chuckled softly. "Later, if you would? Hmm? I'm sure he will oblige you."

Langxue started. The only firebender who'd hit Kyoshi Island in the past century was-

Oh. Whale droppings.

I always knew the Moon had a sick sense of humor.

Almost as bad as, say, a certain dragon. Who deserved to be *frozen solid*.

"So, Captain," Shidan said easily, as if icy vengeance weren't breathing a few feet away, "shall we talk?"

"Talk?" the guard captain all but spat. "With all *due* respect, lord, there's nothing to talk about. You're between us and enemies of the Fire Nation." His voice dropped, low and venomous. "Including a *known traitor*."

The Fire Lord's son tried not to bristle. But pale gold was hard, and ready to fight.

Ready to kill, Langxue corrected himself with a shiver. He'd seen that look on Saoluan, once or twice. It wasn't something you forgot.

And... okay, that was weird. Some of the tension had gone out of Saoluan, even as she stood ready to strike. Why-?

I'm an idiot. He's a traitor? And willing to kill his own soldiers? Then Shidan didn't lie to us. He didn't tell us everything, and I'm going to stick icicles all over him for that... but he didn't lie.

"You are mistaken, Captain." Shidan's gaze was level, and just as deadly. "I stand between you, and my grandson."

The teenager's expression didn't change. It could have been carved from stone.

But through the water, Langxue felt a ripple of hope.

He claimed me. He knows whose blood I carry, he has to know! But he still...

Zuko swallowed. No. No crying. Bad time for it.

Subtly testing ice, Shirong glanced at the dragon, and the captain's suddenly grim face. "I might be wrong," he murmured, "but I have the impression this just got-"

"Serious," Zuko finished for him.

"Ah." Shirong grimaced. "Stay or go?"

"Wait," Zuko advised. "I think-"

"So you lied about your family, too," Jet spat. "Why should I expect anything else from a Fire bastard?"

Shirong winced. Zuko almost cringed; there'd be no way out of this without bloodshed now, he could feel half the people in earshot go from outraged to *murderous*-

"Your pardon, Captain," Shidan said dryly. "I need a moment."

Turned on his heel, took two long strides, and plucked Jet out of the ice like a messenger hawk stooping on a rabbit-dove. And *shook* him. Hard.

Given Shidan was *maybe* an inch taller than he was, Zuko had to stare.

Gripping the nape of Jet's neck, Shidan slammed the teenager to his knees. Waited, one deliberate second, for Jet to try to reach for his swords-

Wrapped his free hand around Jet's throat, clawed nails dimpling skin. And growled. "*Do not move.*"

Showing the most sanity Zuko had ever seen from him, Jet froze.

"My daughter," Shidan said grimly, "is a good, honorable, noble woman. To suggest she would so dishonor her lawfully wedded husband, her clan, and her children - whatever grievance you may think you have against my blood, you will *end it*. Or I may not choose to be merciful."

"You're the ones who need mercy. But there's not going to be any, when the Earth Kingdom fights back!" Jet shot back.

The dragon snorted, lip curled. "You *are* a young fool. Playing for time? Don't bother. Your friends in the trees have met... *my* friends in the trees. There will be no rescue."

His friends in the-? Zuko glanced up, and tried not to stare at painted faces. *Yu Yan. Shidan brought Yu Yan!*

Meaning another of Byakko's plans, encouraging some of those with a knack for chi-use to take up archery, had paid off. But that Shidan had taken them from their unit as well... oh, this was not good.

Blood trickled from the tips of claws, bright as the sweat on Jet's face. "Just get it over with!"

"Shidan," the swordswoman protested.

"Think it through, Warrior." Shidan's tone was calm, and cold. "To whom has this boy - this murderous, *ignorant* boy - just given insult?" He glanced at the guard captain. "Death *would* be mercy, compared to what awaits him."

"So it would." Deliberately ignoring the Yu Yan, the captain eyed Jet, a smirk twitching his mustache.

Zuko recognized that dark satisfaction, and felt chill. The captain might claim he was only following orders; occupied civilians *did not* insult the Fire Lord. But in this time, in this place, with rebellion and chaos on every hand...

It'll be a public - long - execution.

Another scar on his people's soul.

Enough. "We don't bargain with lives," Zuko said harshly.

"Impudent youngling," Shidan observed, kneading blood-speckled skin. "But correct." He *tched*. "So what shall we do with you?"

Challenge. Subtle, polite - but Zuko could taste it.

Whose clan are you, young one? Your father's, to turn this fool over to death, as he likely deserves? Or mine - to follow an elder of Byakko?

Zuko took a deep breath, and let his heart break. And made the only choice he could, for his people.

I miss you. Oh Agni, Shidan, I miss you! But this has to be my clan, my domain. Or it's not going to work, and Kyoshi's decree will kill us all.

"Whatever we're going to do, we'll do it on the water."

Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He is not as Ursa described her child.

Eyes open for other surprises, Shidan stepped onto the deck of his grandson's territory. A glance, a breath; he drank in the controlled chaos of Captain Jee's crew, the whimpers of those injured or frightened by their flight from Gaipan, the thick tang of fresh paint meant to keep saltwater from gnawing steel into rust.

A good sign, that last. Even in the midst of rebellion, the small needs were being seen to.

Speaking of seeing to needs... Shidan stepped out of the crew's way, fire-writing in air where his ship could view the signals they'd previously agreed to. *Safe. Traveling with kin for now.*

A marine cleared his throat. "And who would you be signaling, sir?"

"My ship," Shidan said plainly, barely glancing at the younger and more nervous firebenders behind his interrogator. That steady man knew quite well who he was signaling to. The real question would be *why*, and what threat it might pose to *Suzuran*. "Sergeant...?"

"Kyo, sir." Polite. But not at all impressed by noble gold.

Shidan smiled wryly. Good. The sergeant would need that steadiness, with his grandson on board. "Captain Shinya would worry if I did not contact him, despite the fact that our archers are bringing word back directly. He always worries." The dragon chuckled quietly. "Not without cause, I fear. I am sometimes quite the trial to my own heart's lady." Over half a century walking among humans, and he was still too quick to sharpen claws when it was clever words that were called for. He rarely *acted* on those impulses, and never without cause, but even the most blind humans might find themselves... unsettled, by his presence. And that brought a host of troubles of its own.

The sergeant inclined his head. "Lieutenant Teruko did mention trouble has a way of finding you, Lord Shidan." He glanced toward the young prince, currently clumped in with earthbenders, soldiers, and his worried uncle; explaining, it would seem by the slash of a hand that trailed a faint shimmer of heated air, exactly what had passed on shore. "Seems to be a family talent."

"Shidan," the dragon said firmly. "I hold no noble rank, outside my lady's husband." No loyalties, outside of Byakko. Very handy for his beloved, when Fire Lord Ozai's will threatened to become inconvenient. "And yes. It most certainly is." He gestured toward the two taking shelter in the fire-shadow of his presence. Not *hiding*, surely not. "Kyoshi Warrior Saoluan, and her charge Langxue. We have a great need to speak with Prince Zuko and General Iroh-"

"What the *hell* am I supposed to do with you, Jet?" came a healthy young growl.

"-But I believe it can wait until we are underway," Shidan said dryly. "I do so wish to hear this."

"What are *you* going to do?" Jet shot back, not at all fazed by the stone cuffing his wrists together; Shirong's work, like the bonds Gaipan's guards would be working their way free of this very moment. "Yeah, right. Who's in charge around here?"

Shidan tried not to snicker in the sudden silence.

Saoluan traded an incredulous glance with her young friend. "You set that up!" she hissed, just above a whisper.

"Such a harsh statement," Shidan murmured back. "I simply took advantage of the situation that presented itself. I'd never met my grandson. I can feel where his loyalties lie, but that does not mean he is *aware* of them. He is still young. He might not have known himself if he were pulled to Ozai, or wished to seek shelter of his mother's clan from the war. Which would be his right. He has been wounded, in much more than body; deeper, even, than you have suffered, young waterbender. I do say that, knowing you held kinless among your own - for you have one beside you who *will not* see you come to harm, and all too often my grandson... has not." He sighed. "But I am here now, and I would shelter him, had he been wounded too deeply to continue. Spirits and the world be damned. Yet he is *not*. He has the strength to fight on. I needed to know."

Agni, but he *wanted* to snatch the young one up and tear back to Byakko like the mother of all hurricanes was on their heels. This was his Ursa's boy, his kin, wounded and grieving and alone. His clan had suffered enough. *More* than enough.

But Zuko has the strength to stand as a great name. I will not take that from him.

So. He would behave, and do his lady's nerves good, and sit on a cranky dragon's instincts. And hope, oh so very much, that there was someone in the near future who truly needed his throat torn out. It was so very calming, to be *done* with an enemy.

Spirits, if only Fang had been able to explain that to Roku!

Curse the spirits and their compromises. No Avatar had ever been dragon enough to feel the needs of those who bore Fire's own blood. And so few, so very few, had ever taken the time to try to understand.

We are the sons and daughter of Fire. We do not defeat our enemies. We kill them.

"And if he was still on Ozai's side?" Langxue said warily.

"There are ways." Shidan gazed blandly back at sea-green. "Not safe ways. But I am his grandfather. Few others have that advantage." Not that even that and fire-healing might have been enough to save one as stubborn as his clan if he did not *want* to be saved... but a better chance than most, for breaking loyalty. Thank Agni he didn't have to risk it.

"You're kidding," Jet said flatly, brown eyes scanning the officers and sundry others of import around the young prince.

Not entirely stupid after all, Shidan thought, catching sight of young Teruko on the edge of the crowd. Glaring at Shirong. Well, well; and he could certainly understand the impulse, but surely Teruko knew his grandson well enough by now to know nothing short of an armored division could keep one of Sozin's line out of peril? And *that* was if the spirits were feeling *charitable*-

"You take orders from a *waterbender*?"

Shidan sighed, examining the blood still caught under his claws. And him half a world away from Kotone's gentle teeth to preen them clean. *Idiot. Entirely.*

Zuko gripped the bridge of his nose. Sighed, raised his head, and glared at the young rebel. "Do you ever think of anything beyond killing the Fire Nation, Jet? *Ever*? Like - I don't know, your friends' *lives*? Or do you just think it's worth it, shooting through them to get to us?"

The red-painted girl fumed. "Jet would *never*-"

"He did, Smellerbee," Zuko cut her off. "Because if they didn't know, and they felt dishonored - first they'd kill me, and *then* they'd kill the *witnesses*." He eyed Jet. "Don't try to talk your way out of this one. You know us too well not to know we'd do it."

"Foggy Swamp," Jet almost spat, eyes narrowed in contempt. "You people *always* lie-"

"An evasion, perhaps," Shidan sliced across his words. "Not a lie. We do, indeed, have kin there." *More than I can say.*

Jet's archer ally raised an eyebrow.

Shidan inclined his head, sensing the wealth of questions in that movement. Interesting, indeed; and did Jet know what faint traces of his chosen enemy walked beside him? Did Longshot even know? Bold, for such a child to take up archery. But not unheard of, if the blood should wake after generations of sleep.

Visibly unnerved, the archer took a step back.

Jet's gaze whipped toward the dragon. "What *are* you?"

What, indeed. Shidan's lip curled, an amused flash of fang-

"I'd worry less about him, and more about the person who's going to drop you in the river if you don't start thinking," Zuko said coldly. "Think you can swim in stone cuffs? *I don't.*"

"He wouldn't," Langxue breathed.

"It is never wise to push a great name past his patience," Shidan murmured. "I do wonder what ill those two have done to each other." A simple insult - it *had* been simple, if deadly - would never have made the boy Ursa had shown him so ready to execute an idiot.

He had three years alone with Ozai.

True; though Byakko knew how that had ended. A young man who'd defied custom to protect his country's soldiers was unlikely to have been twisted to cruelty. No matter how badly the spirits tormented him.

So. Take it as faith that the heart-shape Ursa had gifted him of her son, hand to hand and mind to mind, was truth. A young dragon-child, fragile as they always were their first decade, yet still swift to place himself between others and harm. A child now much nearer grown, and far less fragile. Which meant-

Ah. Of course. To someone on this vessel, Jet is a deadly threat. Shidan breathed slow and deep, feeling the fires of loyalty that burned with his grandson's rhythm. No one on this deck or in Jee's crew would be incapable of defending themselves, so... Aha. And *interesting*.

A young clan. So new he could still taste Agni's fire in its blessing, tempered with the pure rock-salt of nurturing earth.

Earth and fire and kin. How can that be? I know all of Byakko, even those we have hidden...

No. Not Byakko. He sensed a chilling touch of power, of *other*. Familiar, though he'd only felt it in three bloodlines. Azulon's get, by Ilah. Governor Tsumi's small clan. And Aang.

My grandson has found Roku's third bloodline. And they are here.

Yāorén, and Sozin's blood, and Roku's. Did I fear the hurricane? It is upon us.

"The brig, sir?" Jee gave Jet a jaundiced eye.

"Likely wise," General Iroh said heavily. "I would let the young lady and her companion roam free, but they are Jet's freedom fighters. They might be tempted to act against the ship on his behalf." He gave Jet a sober, disappointed look. "Lady Toph Bei Fong risked her life to set you free of Ba Sing Se, and you still find no better purpose than killing those of the Fire Nation. You asked for a second chance, young man. When will you take it?"

Jet glared at them all. "You think I'd ever give up fighting for the Earth Kingdom?"

Zuko glared back. "We're working *with* the Earth King."

Langxue stared, and Saoluan stiffened. "He's - how - *what*?"

At least she'd kept it a whispered sputter. "Interesting," Shidan murmured. Trying not to leap over there, drag his grandson off, and pester the young man into laying out all the fascinating details. The spirits had been meddling, vastly meddling, and they would need all their wits to ride the tsunami's wave.

Manners. Caution. Zuko wanted to trust him, he could feel it. As he could feel the pain that ran deeper than mere scars ever could. If he wished his grandson to be true kin, they had no time to waste hurrying.

"I don't believe you!" Jet snarled. "You're *Fire Nation*. You're all-"

"Fine," Zuko cut him off. "Enjoy the steel bars. Maybe you'll figure out we're *not* lying. If you don't - I think we'll find a nice island to drop you on. Or the river. Your choice. Lieutenant?"

Teruko nodded. "Sergeant?"

"Yes, ma'am." Smiling grimly, Kyo and his men moved in, maneuvering prisoners as if stone weighed no more than feathers.

"Odds are he tries to kill us all in our sleep," Zuko grumbled.

"Nephew," Iroh sighed. "A man can change his mind."

"Uncle. We were under Lake Laogai, I was with Toph breaking him out of *prison*, we were surrounded by Dai Li trying to kill us or drag us off to bend our minds, and he sees I'm a firebender and tries to kill me. I am *not* going to risk anyone on this ship hoping he gets an attack of *sanity*." Zuko growled under his breath. "We need to get these people settled-"

"We'll handle it, sir." Teruko glanced Shidan's way. Pointedly.

Zuko sighed. "I know."

"Sir!" Teruko's glance whipped between them, a woman on shore watching kin swept toward a waterfall.

"I *know*. He's my grandfather," Zuko said soberly. "Who I've *never met*, because he's a great name of Byakko, and that clan's kept their mouths shut and their eyes open ever since Kyoshi dropped in to visit. And *now* he's here. On a ship the Fire Lord would sink without blinking twice." He

winned. "This is not going to be good."

Pessimistic young fledgling. But accurate. "That will depend," Shidan said graciously. "How skilled have you become at spirit-healing?"

I know there's never much room on a ship, Langxue thought, tucked up against Saoluan as the safest spot in the cabin, *but this is ridiculous*.

Normally, he'd guess, this was General Iroh's quarters; warm, and more than roomy for a single sailor, steel bulkheads barely softened by tapestries, a hint of jasmine tea in the air. But from the amount of water and bits of blue showing from a stuffed clothing chest, he and Amaya were sharing. And a cabin meant for one, shared by two, was absolutely *not* meant to hold six. Especially when one of those six was a dragon, who seemed to occupy more space than humanly possible just by *breathing*.

So the good news was, besides the two royal firebenders themselves, none of Prince Zuko's people were in the cabin with them. The bad news was... none of them were in the cabin with them. Langxue had a bad feeling he really could have used that wry earthbender Shirong as backup.

"Let me get this straight." Pale gold burned into him. "Kyoshi Island's been attacked by spirit-monsters because the Ocean Spirit's upset. And the Ocean's upset because there are *thousands* of restless Fire Nation ghosts." Zuko's eyes narrowed. "I wonder why that might be?"

"Bunch of bad funerals?" Saoluan said brightly.

Langxue felt the silent snarl, vibrating through the deck. Tried not to shiver. Shidan was a dragon, but so far he'd been a *friendly* dragon. His grandson...

The Fire Lord's son.

Trust, seeped into him from Shidan's subtle fingers against his back. *Testing of strangers. Angry. Not at you.*

...Dragons had no right to be so *spooky*.

"So you realize you're in trouble on *Kyoshi Island*, and you came looking for help," Zuko went on. "And you walk into *Fire Nation* hands to get it. I know you're desperate, but are you *crazy*? Who gave you the information to find us? They're probably massing troops-"

"Zuko." Iroh rested his hand on a stiff young forearm. "Forgive him. My nephew is not accustomed to friendly interference from the spirits."

Was that-? Oh yeah. *Definitely* a groan.

Langxue had to smile wryly, suddenly feeling a lot better about this whole mess. Monks and nuns could hold the spirits in worshipful reverence. Yāorén had to *deal* with spirits run amuck, or humans who'd provoked them, or both. Which meant a lot less reverence and a lot more desperate improvisation. Fire Lord's son or not, Zuko already had the *attitude*.

I'm not alone.

Saoluan blinked at Iroh. "You believe the spirits told us?"

"As surely as I believe your young friend was injured, and needs our help," Iroh said graciously.

And smiled at the woman beside him.

Yeah. He really could have used Shirong, Langxue realized. Or at least, someone else to put between him and a helpful Northern waterbender.

That's what she says she is, anyway.

Blue eyes, check. Dark hair, with just a bit of gray, and no engagement necklace; back home, she'd be married with some kids still half-grown. Dark skin; not as dark as some of the Southern Tribe he'd seen, but definitely darker than anyone at home. Blue dress, but that was a city style, formal and proper, and it wasn't *anything* like home. Put it all together, and- "No."

Water cupped in a globe in her hands, Amaya edged no closer. "You need help."

"I *know*. I just - can't." Langxue shivered. *I wish I didn't remember*. "I know... too much about what can go wrong. Spirit-healing takes trust."

Something most yāorén got through that first, life-saving time by sheer guts and not knowing any better. Hyourin had been hurt, bleeding, burning inside from the fire laced through his spirit. When Kaze had found him, and said *let me help-*

Kaze. Langxue swallowed, and met eyes pale and fierce as those of the dragon behind him. "Can you do it?"

"Me?" Zuko said in disbelief.

Which wasn't nearly as disconcerting as Iroh's raised eyebrow. The old general was *considering* him, in a way that reminded Langxue all too much of Kaze and Shidan at once. Eep.

"Him?" Saoluan's hand crept toward her hilt, outraged. "Little brother, he *burned down* Kyoshi Village."

"I'm sure he's sorry," Langxue managed. He didn't want anyone poking around in his spirit. *Anyone*. But if someone had to - he trusted Kaze. And this was Kaze's cousin. There couldn't be anyone safer in the world.

"Oh, I just bet he's sorry," Saoluan grumbled. "Comes in, starts a fight on a *neutral* island-"

"An island harboring a declared enemy of the Fire Lord," Zuko said stiffly. "So no. I'm not sorry."

Langxue tried not to groan. *Oh, he is so dead*.

"He was my father's enemy. My only way home." Zuko looked Saoluan straight in the eye. "I was following orders, I *almost* had him, and an airbender with your fans is a menace. Did they tell you why those fires spread so fast?"

"You're not the one that put out the flames," Saoluan declared.

"No. The Avatar did. Riding the Unagi. *Idiot*." Zuko took a deep breath, let a little steam blow out. "He was a threat to my people. He *is* a threat to my people. If you think I'd let a *neutral village* stop me..." He sighed. "But I am sorry, Warrior Saoluan. I'm sorry I was loyal to someone who didn't deserve it. I'm sorry I didn't figure that out years ago. If I'd known, if I'd been smart enough to *talk* to Aang at the South Pole instead of..." He winced. "Like my grandfather said. You want to have it out later on the deck? I'll meet you with steel. That's fair." Pale gold narrowed. "Just tell me one thing. You know who I am. If my father were in an innocent Earth Kingdom village, one that didn't

want a fight - would you ask before you went to kill him?"

Langxue swallowed dryly.

"The Avatar," Saoluan bit out, "is *nothing* like your father."

"No. He's not." Zuko's gaze never wavered. "But that's not an answer."

"You know what the Fire Lord has done to the world!"

Zuko smirked, wry and bitter. "Yes. I know." He shrugged. "I don't really have to ask, do I? You'd be one of the first ones in."

"You..." Saoluan seemed to slump a little. "Damn you. You're a firebender. You're not supposed to use *logic*."

"A bad habit I have passed on to my nephew," Iroh chuckled, walking a lotus tile across his fingers.

Oh man, Langxue wanted to groan. *Not another Pai Sho nut- wait. Wait.*

...He couldn't *believe* he hadn't made the connection before.

White Lotus. General Iroh? *The Dragon of the West?*

Careful. Careful. You knew the White Lotus a thousand years ago. Even if they are still looking for yāorén... who knows what they're doing for the Avatar now?

"So you do know about the North Pole," Saoluan said quietly.

Zuko snorted. "We were *there*."

"...Oh."

"If it should help," Iroh added, "I am sorry we attacked your island. It had remained a place of peace, untouched by the war. Such refuges are few in this world. I wish we had arrived a day later."

Zuko's face was still. A little too still. Langxue eyed him. "You don't think that would have worked," he challenged.

"He's a twelve-year-old airbender who found an island where people *liked* him," Zuko grumbled.

"He sticks around places like that until he gets bored. Or the spirits send somebody like me to shove him back into being the Avatar again."

Saoluan gave him a skeptical look. "You think the *spirits* send you after the Avatar?" She crossed her arms. "And I suppose that makes it all okay."

"No. That definitely does *not* make it okay," Zuko snarled. "He's twelve, and naive, and an *idiot*. *And* the Avatar. Which makes him a threat to the whole Fire Nation. Not because of what he'll do to us - *and he will*, you *know* that - but when *he* blasts our army to shreds, who do you think is going to be tearing through the rest of us behind him?"

Saoluan bit her lip, but didn't back down. "You deserve it."

"A lot of us deserve it," Zuko said tightly. "Some of us *don't*." He shook his head. "You think whoever comes in to mop us up is going to stop with just the army? When they saw what the Avatar did at the North Pole? He's the *spirit of the world*, and he *obliterated* us. You think people

aren't going to think that's the right thing to do to *rest* of the Fire Nation?"

"But you're a *yāorén*," Langxue blurted out. "You have to-"

Zuko's glare killed the words in his throat. "Help the Avatar," the prince finished icily. "So I'm told. I didn't ask for this. I didn't *want* it. La *took* me, and wrecked the *entire line of succession*, and that means if Uncle and I don't pull off something crazy, a lot of our people are going to be *dead*. The spirits want my help? They'll get it *my* way. And my way means, I am *not* going to let Aang kill us all off. Not on purpose, and not by being a naive, gullible, everybody can just get along airbender who'll ask so *nicely* for his allies to stop killing us." Steam wisped from his sigh. "So if you want me to do this, instead of Amaya - I am *not* going to be a *yāorén* like you think they ought to be. I am not going anywhere *near* the Avatar. He wants to go after the Fire Lord? I'm not going to stop him. He's the Avatar. The Fire Lord's a firebending master. I've seen them both fight." He snorted. "When dragons duel, a smart cricket-mouse finds a crack to hide in. I've found a hole in the world, and I'm going to try to patch it. That's it."

You're a yāorén, Langxue thought, stunned. *A warrior yāorén. You couldn't be a cricket-mouse if you tried.*

And Shidan was so *still* behind him.

Shidan said he was hurt. And - if La didn't ask...

Oh, man. He's Fire and Water. And he really thinks the Avatar would kill his people. Or let people kill them.

Tell a *great name* he was supposed to help the boy who'd do that? You might as well try to put out a forest fire with a ladle. Zuko was angry, to the core *angry*; Langxue could feel it, rippling faintly through all the water in the cabin.

He let out a breath of his own, convinced. "Yeah," Langxue nodded. "I want you to do it." He looked at Amaya, a little embarrassed. "I'm sorry. But I don't know you. And we're both waterbenders, and... I don't *know* what your tribe wants. What they're going to do in this war."

Amaya studied him, and inclined her head. "And you have brought your own tribe with you."

One big sister. Pretty small tribe. "Yeah," Langxue admitted, lump in his throat. "Saoluan's here because of me, she's not going to leave me if I do something stupid. Like get caught up by someone else's family. So I can't *be* stupid." He nodded at Zuko. "He's a firebender. If he uses fire, he's not going to catch me. Not by accident."

Zuko flinched back a little, then set his jaw. "I'm not going to do it on purpose, either. You need help. I'll help. You decide after that you want to hear how crazy we are, that's up to you."

Looking at his sister, Langxue raised an eyebrow.

She frowned at him, then eyed the firebenders. "You found a hole in the world the Avatar can't fix," Saoluan said skeptically.

"Indeed we have," Iroh said plainly. "The Avatar has power beyond any bender. But there are skills he lacks. What we have... well, it will not be perfect. But it may be *enough*."

Langxue wasn't going to ask. He was *not* going to ask, no matter how much his curiosity itched at him. And Iroh knew it was tempting; he could see it, in that amused gleam of gold eyes.

No wonder La grabbed his nephew. That guy is pure yāorén-bait.

Well. One way to get his answers for sure. "Let's do this."

Saoluan frowned at him, a silent *are you sure? Really sure?*

Sighed, and shook it off. "Right behind you."

No. You can't be. Not in this. But it helped. This was his best chance, and he trusted Kaze, but he could still feel his heart jumping as Zuko pinched a candle alight and-

Spirits. I haven't seen that in... heh, a thousand years...

Green and gold flickering around his hands, Zuko reached for head and heart.

Don't fight. Don't fight, stay calm, stay still, he promised he would help-

I won't hurt you.

The whisper of another spirit, as slow but sure fire melded the pieces of his spirit back together. But there was an echo to it, a *familiar* echo...

Drawing on fragments of the past, Langxue sank inside.

Stars, and waves, and moonlight.

Not surprising. Zuko was using fire, but they were both claimed by water - *oh*.

In the foreground, flames just flickering away from his healed wounds, the scarred prince he'd seen in life. Behind him, ghostly-

He looks like Shidan.

Not the face; though the ghost was just as white-haired and wryly smiling. It was the stance, the paired blades - dao, not daisho - the mountain-striped robes...

Looking at that double image, that double *life*, Langxue had to laugh.

"Where are we?" Zuko demanded.

"It's okay-"

"Am I dead again? Once was *enough*, damn it!"

"It's okay," Langxue insisted, trying to pull his face straight again. "This is just something we can do." *Something we have to do. Because sometimes we're teaching a yāorén right in the middle of a spirit-uproar, and there's no time.*

But no one had been around to teach Zuko. Ouch.

"We?" Zuko eyed him warily. And blinked. "You're... a lot of people."

Oh good, at least he's seeing clearly. "I've come back a lot of times," Langxue admitted. Looked around the night-dark shore they'd crafted where their spirits touched. "This isn't the spirit world. Exactly. Though we can get there from here, if we have to. It's got to be bad before we risk that. We're not the Avatar. We're just human." He grinned wryly. "Well... mostly."

"Mostly." Zuko's face was still, but the waves surged.

"That's what we pay for who we are," Langxue said honestly. "The way we always cross the spirits the first time? Ordinary people would die. They'd just die. We don't. We *won't*. Because something's more important than dying human."

"You mean we're all crazy," Zuko said sourly.

"Well..." Langxue hesitated. "Yeah."

That won a quiet snicker. "So how do we get out of here?" Zuko asked.

At least that's quick to teach. "Just find your center, and pull back..."

A breath, and Langxue blinked. The cabin again. Good.

I've got a yāorén who already hates spirits and the Avatar. If I'm going to turn him around, I better look like I know what I'm doing.

It wasn't going to be easy. If Zuko had actually seen what Saoluan had said happened to the Fire Nation fleet... well. That was *bad*.

The Avatar hasn't had yāorén to help for centuries. I know what Aang did was awful - but who was going to teach him any better? We can fix this. We have to.

For more reasons than one. Saoluan said Avatar Aang trusted that Southern waterbender, Katara. And if a *firebender* had been given water...

Aang's firebending teacher. He's got to be.

Now all I've got to do is talk him into it.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, you can all feel sorry for Langxue now. He doesn't know Zuko or Aang. Yet.

I've been checking out the WMG page on Embers. **Evil Grin.** At least some of the guesses are accurate; I don't plan to spoil anyone's fun by saying which ones unless someone's really dying to know. I do find the bits about Kuei interesting.

I will, however, say straight out that Jinhai's not going to end up a Fire Lord. Zuko wouldn't do that to the poor kid.

I've also finally seen the Last Airbender.

...

...

For the love of mercy, someone, tell me they'll steal a few thousand from the SFX budgets for *scriptwriters* for the next 2. Rufftoon (on DeviantArt) skewered it so well...

That said, it had its moments. The fight between Zuko and Aang at the North Pole was as down-to-earth of a mix of martial arts and bending (and breaking things) as I could have hoped for. Iroh is awesome. (Plus, I looked up dreadlocks in the cultures the film is supposed to pull from. If Wiki's right, they mean - among other things - a spiritual master with power over fire. Nice.) And if you're looking for the subtleties, it was very interesting to see visible differences in skill level between occupation soldier firebenders (need a lot of moves to charge up), invasion troops in the Siege of the North (a move or two), and Zuko. And then Iroh tops everybody. Oh yeah.

Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

Azula warning.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Wow," Ty Lee breathed, shifting her balance just a little to counter the tank's vibration as she looked at the explosion of papers all over Azula's room. "Did we hit a really bad bump? Because I thought I would have felt it, but maybe I was doing a finger-stand-"

"No," Azula said shortly, as the acrobat closed the door behind her. "I did this intentionally."

"...Okay?"

"And no, I haven't hit my head again," the princess said wryly. "This is a strategy." Even if it seemed utterly silly to describe. "It occurred to me that the Fire Nation's strategic environment has become suddenly complicated."

Wide gray eyes blinked. Looked over scattered papers. Shrugged.

"Shell-matching," Azula filled in.

"Oh!" Ty Lee brightened. Frowned a little. "Um...?"

"For the past century, our enemies have been clearly defined," Azula broke it down further. "We eliminated the Air Temples, set to work on the Earth Kingdom, and harassed the Water Tribes." She paused, giving the airbender a measuring look. "You've never seemed concerned about the temples." *But that was before you remembered you were a bender.*

And did her father know the onmitsu could do that? Did Fire Lord Ozai have any idea?

No. He trusts me. Not with all of our strategy, of course. But if he'd known anyone could tamper with your mind to the point you forgot your own spirit - he would have told me.

Which made it all the more critical to avoid pursuing Zuko. *Perhaps* she would have trusted the news of the Avatar's planned invasion on the eclipse to a messenger hawk. But as things stood - some intelligence was too deadly to bring any way but in person.

We need to know how their methods work, and how to counter them. No firebender should ever be robbed of their flame!

As for what they'd done to Ty Lee... Agni, how much of the acrobat's disconnect from the world was Ty Lee, and how much from being cut off from her own spirit?

You hurt her, Azula thought toward those as-yet unnamed elders. *She'd learn their names, one way or another. You hurt one of my people. And I will make sure it never happens again. No matter how useful you are.*

And... Ty Lee seemed to actually be thinking about what she'd said. Interesting.

"What happened to the temples was sad," Ty Lee said at last. "But I don't think they would have let Aang be another Yangchen."

Azula arched a brow. "Yangchen?"

"The last Air Nomad Avatar. Only she got away."

"Got away?" Azula asked carefully. Avatars were honored by their nations. Or so the histories read.

Of course, she had reason to know histories could lie.

Ty Lee nodded vigorously, wafting papers aside to bounce onto Azula's bed. Absently, Azula noted how the airbending briefly muted the rumble of the tank's engines. A cue like that might be vital to get the drop on the Avatar before he could get it on her.

Folded on herself to her liking, Ty Lee squinted into memory. "You know the stories about training the Yu Yan because of the raids that killed Avatar Hirata?"

"Thoroughly," Azula said dryly. Some of those had been quite heady adventures for a young lady. If she hadn't been graced with firebending, she'd have fought to be first among them.

Only Father never would allow her a bow. It wasn't *fair*.

Father isn't here.

Hmm. Risky thought. But they'd need the archers for the eclipse. And she could always present the case that she'd wished to make certain no officious fool who couldn't read a calendar had ordered them elsewhere.

"That was Skylord Subodei," Ty Lee went on. "He had a *vision*. The White Wind would own the skies. The rest of us..." She glanced at her hands, obviously picturing them pierced through with bloody ropes.

"My uncle had a vision of Ba Sing Se," Azula noted. "That didn't turn out so well."

"Yeah," Ty Lee said softly. "I wonder who the Fire Sage who helped him with it was. I bet he was a lot like Monk Xiangchen."

Court-trained instinct pricked up its ears: *This is important*. "Who?"

"Monk Xiangchen. Subodei's favorite shaman," Ty Lee obliged. "He had a vision, too. And it meant using the Skylord's." She shifted the feet dangling over her head like other girls might shrug. "He wanted the whole world to be at peace."

Azula let silence stretch between them, making absolutely certain Ty Lee had no intention of rephrasing that impossible statement. "So he helped a man out to rape, pillage, and conquer?"

"Think about it," Ty Lee said; for once, serious. "Once Subodei conquered the world, Xiangchen and his followers could make people peaceful."

Azula shook her head. "That's impossible. You can't *make*-"

"People can't fight if they don't remember how. Or why."

Stepping blindly back through scattered papers, Azula sat down. Trained control or not, she wanted

to shiver. Forget to fight? Forget what kept you alive? *Agni. Oh, father of fire, preserve us.*

"So he helped Subodei until Avatar Hirata was killed, so the Skylord would give him the next Avatar," Ty Lee went on. "And he *did*. So Xiangchen got to keep her as a nun, away from the world, while Subodei and his son Yisugei and *his* son Subodei - boy, that was always hard to keep straight - kept conquering all over the place. And... well, it's a lot of long stories. But she got away, and something happened near the North Pole, and ashes were falling out of the sky everywhere, and she got Subodei and his warriors and Xiangchen - but she didn't get the ones who *believed* in Xiangchen. Not all of them." Ty Lee took a deep breath, gray eyes bright with tears. "And all the healers were treating lung-sickness from the ashes, so Xiangchen's followers could just go places and *find* them. And they took them *away*. To the temples. And no one ever, *ever* came back."

Fools, if they didn't hide, Azula almost said. Regarded those threatening tears, and softened her tone. "So you lost clan to the Air Temples."

"I don't... well... it wasn't just the healers," Ty Lee gulped. "If they found you, if they knew what you were, if you couldn't get away - airbenders were supposed to be *spiritual*. That's what they said. And Xiangchen said spiritual people didn't have attachments. Ever. So if they found you..." She shivered.

Cold rage burned in Azula's heart. *You're supposed to be sunshine. The wild wind, blowing where it will. You're not ever supposed to be afraid. Not of someone who isn't me.* "He won't do that to you, Ty Lee. Do you hear me? The Avatar will *never* do that to you. I'll burn him alive first."

The acrobat sniffled. Scrubbed at her eyes, and gave Azula a watery smile. "You can be really scary. In a good way." She unfolded herself, serious. "That's why I couldn't let Zuko win. He's too nice. You say you'll stop Aang if he tries that, and you *mean* it. Zuko... he doesn't want to hurt people. Not really." She glanced down, sad. "I kind of hope Aang doesn't know anything about... what the temples did. The elders think the monks didn't catch anybody after Chin the Conqueror, but who knows?" She rustled a few papers. "So... messing up a bunch of histories and reports is new tactics?"

Conversational whiplash. Occupational hazard, talking with Ty Lee. "As I was saying, it's been the Fire Nation against the world," Azula obliged. "Now we have the Fire Nation. The Earth Kingdom. The Avatar's rag-tag band, wherever they are. Whoever Brushmaker Tu was working for. And my brother's apparent alliance with the Earth King. Multiple factions; multiple goals." She waved a hand at scattered pages. "Given our intelligence analyses somehow missed half of those, I intend to do a new one."

"By mixing everything up? So... you can see if things really match, instead of just being together because that's where everyone always puts them." Ty Lee brightened. "Did you find anything? Can I help?"

"Yes," Azula said bluntly. "And I believe my brother is better at intuiting danger than most of our generals." She tapped a sharp nail on her own list of notes. "I've identified at least three key conspirators who must have been assisting Uncle. All of whom had relatives among the raw recruits in the Forty-First."

"Oh," Ty Lee said in a small voice.

Stupid, Zuko, Azula thought. *You should have whispered to Uncle. You should have let him stop it.*

Stupid, possibly. Naive, she was beginning to believe instead. How had Zuko reached thirteen so innocent?

She shook it off, and gave Ty Lee a look askance. "You're not thinking far enough. If Zuko was able to grasp that would be a fracture point to lead men into treachery three years ago, what has he seen about the Avatar *now*?" She waved a hand toward the tank wall, vaguely toward Ba Sing Se, now days behind them. "He left with the Avatar. We saw it. But my rock-headed, treacherous brother, who *doesn't want to kill*, didn't *stay* with the Avatar. Think, Ty Lee! What does that mean?"

"Ooough." Ty Lee turned faintly green. "That sounds... really bad."

"Yes," Azula said grimly. "That's why we need to talk to him."

"...Huh?"

"It will be difficult," Azula mused, tapping the list thoughtfully. "He's not stupid enough to let me close enough to kill him again. It'll have to be messages. And we can't risk those falling into the wrong hands..."

The vibration of the tank shifted. She crossed the room to fling the door open. "Why are we slowing down?"

The Dai Li who'd just raised a hand to knock looked slightly nonplussed. "Lady Li - or Lo - spotted a messenger hawk. They say it's come for us."

Brow raised, Azula headed for one of the top hatches.

Fifteen minutes later, having absorbed the details someone had officially admitted to about the Yu Yan, her surviving grandfather, and the completely unexpected news of a cousin now heir to Byakko, Azula called a halt for an hour. For target practice.

We really need to talk, Zuzu.

Because if Zuko had somehow made off with part of the Yu Yan needed to defend the capital on the day of the eclipse, he'd better have a *damn good reason*.

He's up to something, Saoluan thought, suspicious. *I just know it.*

Oh, not the Fire Navy lieutenant currently leading them down passageways and companionways, even if he was casting a few shifty glances her way. She'd seen enough sailors trading with the island to recognize a young man sneaking peeks, even if he was in red armor. Not even the pair of princes and the dragon they'd left behind - though she was sure *they* were up to something. Probably lots of somethings.

No. The only one she was worried about was the way too thoughtful little brother walking with her, that touch of white locks ruffling in a breeze, eyes creased and *thinking*.

He's planning something. Can I hide now?

Worse, she was pretty sure he was planning something that had to do with Prince Zuko. And when *two* nefarious plots butted heads, someone was going to get hurt.

...Not that she thought Langxue would plot something nefarious. Well, besides getting them onto a rebel Fire Nation ship in the first place. But there was one thing about her little sword-brother she just *knew* was going to rub their reluctant host raw as leopard-sharkskin, and she couldn't for the life of her see a way around it. Yet.

Langxue respects the spirits. And the Avatar.

He didn't *revere* them, not like some villagers she knew. But he and his family had always honored them, always leaving offerings on the new moons and the season-turns. And they'd always believed the spirit of the world could not be destroyed, and someday there would be an Avatar again. Langxue might not respect what the current Avatar had done - *screw-up of epic proportions* was the most polite thing he'd said about the North Pole - but he was absolutely confident that what Aang *needed* was just some helpful advice so it wouldn't happen again. And from what she'd heard a few minutes ago, he knew just who he wanted to have give it.

Prince Zuko. Give Avatar Aang advice. Nope, not seeing it.

Now, throwing the airbender overboard - that, Saoluan could see. Or throwing *himself* overboard. After all, Zuko could swim.

He was there at the North Pole.

Bad enough to think about when she'd just heard the glee from the elders at the Fire Nation's defeat. Sure, they were the enemy. Sure, they deserved it. But she'd dealt with enough of Langxue's nightmares to have a gut-clenching understanding of just what the invasion fleet had faced. No one fought the Ocean and won. No one.

Once Langxue had told her what would happen to the Fire Nation drowned, and any spirit that came in contact with enough of them... well. She'd had her own nightmares to fight.

And Prince Zuko was there. You want to talk him into helping his nightmare, little brother?

Put that together with the firebender's crazy conviction that an *airbender* would be willing to lead a massacre of his people...

Only it's not so crazy, is it? Saoluan admitted to herself. She'd pestered Shidan for every scrap of information on the onmitsu he'd been willing to scrape together. And if *that* was how you thought of airbenders growing up, and not the nice-guy monks at the temple-

Sweet and charming and oh so sorry if they have to hurt anyone. But they can paralyze you, they can take away your bending, and if you're lucky, they kill you in the middle of the night.

If you're not - they give you to the Fire Lord.

She still thought the Fire Nation was a bunch of paranoid, murdering bastards. But the ones on this ship didn't seem to be murderous. Just paranoid.

Guess I should find out how paranoid. "I get the feeling his highness is a little haunted by the North Pole."

...Which probably wasn't her most diplomatic moment ever. But Langxue was already going to be rubbing Zuko the wrong way. Better to get any hurt feelings aimed at her, first.

"Haunted." Odd; Lieutenant Sadao didn't sound upset. "Yes, ma'am. That's a good way to put it. We've kept a memorial flame burning on *Suzuran*, and it helps, but... you don't get over seeing something like that."

Something about the way he'd said *you*... Saoluan grinned wryly. "You sound like you were there."

Sadao shot her a wary glance. Sighed, and shrugged. "We were."

...*Oh, damn.*

Langxue gave the firebender a measuring look. "How are you still alive?"

"Captain Jee," Sadao said frankly. "He'd seen the Avatar cut loose before. The moment we saw the glow, he had us reverse engines. And pray."

Saoluan almost laughed. The Fire Nation, praying?

Took another look at Sadao's face. "You're serious."

"The captain sailed with General Iroh for months," Sadao stated. "Admiral Zhao said the general feared the spirits, but... well, we know what happened to him." He paused. Looked abashed. "Um. You probably *don't* know what happened to him."

"I'm afraid to ask," Saoluan muttered, morbidly fascinated.

"The Ocean took him." Sadao's gaze was level. "Prince Zuko saw that, too."

Took him. Saoluan tried not to shiver. Not, wrecked his ship. Not, drowned him in a tidal wave. *Took him.*

Meaning their reluctant host had seen a great spirit mete out *personal vengeance* on the Fire Nation's fleet commander.

Great. Kid's not just paranoid. He's right to be paranoid.

"I'm just glad he knows how to duck," Sadao muttered.

"Duck?" Langxue said uneasily, beating her to it.

"He'd just blasted the admiral down," the firebender said wryly. "A little disagreement over blowing up the *Wani*. While the prince was still on it." He nodded toward the next stairwell. "Let's try down here. We're all kind of jammed in various places, so... just tell me if you think this will work, or if you want to transfer to another ship."

Stunned, Saoluan followed.

Silence. Warm, tea-scented, claws ticking almost soundlessly on the table. Silence.

Zuko watched Uncle Iroh glance at the hands resting on polished wood, and felt a tickle of dark humor. *Yes, he's a dragon. Yes, you never looked. Yes, there's a reason Kotone never let him near court.*

Shidan in the midst of the sneering crowd Fire Lord Ozai encouraged. That would be painfully short. Ending in a pile of dead nobles - and yet another dead dragon, at Ozai's hands.

We can't lose him. We can't lose any more dragons. They're few enough as it is.

Few, and very hard to hide, except in human form. Which was never, ever a permanent solution. Just a way to buy time as Byakko tried to stop the madness.

And how have they tried, that I don't know about?

He was afraid to ask. But someone had to. He was just glad Amaya had left for the infirmary,

murmuring something tart to Uncle about freezing any member of the family who got out of hand. It was going to be hard enough translating dragon to Fire Nation without adding Water Tribe to the mess. "Is there vendetta between us?"

"Zuko." Uncle shot him a disapproving look. "He is your grandfather."

Zuko refused to flinch. "So was Azulon."

Shidan snorted; a stifled, dark laugh. "You have his gift for uncomfortable truths. Good. It would be a pity to lose that part of the bloodline."

Zuko stared, totally confused. He'd been compared to a lot of people in his life, but... *Azulon?*

This can't be good.

"As for vendetta..." Shidan let out a quiet breath, and looked Iroh in the eye. "I fear you are the only one who can answer that. I can only tell you what I know, from one I believe without doubt." He turned a hand palm-up, sunlight catching on sharp nails. "Will you hear me?"

"One you believe," Iroh echoed. "Ursa?"

Shidan inclined his head.

Don't jump over the table, don't jump-

Zuko focused on his grip, nails biting, wood heating under his fingers. He had to *know!*

"She is alive."

...And the world was too close and far away at once. Zuko held onto the table, and gulped for air.

"Alive, but wounded," Shidan went on, watching him with knowing eyes, "What Ozai did... well. Ozai." He shook his head. "General Iroh. I do not know what your father said, or intended. Nor did Ursa. She only knew what Azula had threatened Zuko with. A threat Ozai confirmed, when she went to him." Another slow breath. "Your brother meant to sacrifice his son, so he and his chosen heir would succeed Azulon. If that was truly what the Fire Lord ordered - I do not know. And Ursa had no time to learn. To save her children... she struck a very dark bargain."

"All medicines are poisons," Zuko whispered.

"So they are." Shidan regarded Iroh. "Vendetta is yours to decide, Prince Iroh. In Byakko, as among dragons, vendetta is for the living. To mend broken souls, and remove enemies to the clan. But what you will use it for... is your choice."

Uncle was silent, steam drifting from his tea. "To save her *children*."

"She does love Azula, even now." Shidan didn't look away. "Does any mother wish to see one of her children glory in the death of the other?"

Zuko swallowed, heart hurting.

Iroh sighed. "For the living, you say." He gave Shidan a measuring look. "Lord Kuzon did not die in bed."

"We knew Azulon would strike eventually." There was grief in Shidan's voice, and an old, old anger. "Ran was his love and his light. Together they could weather any storm. Without her..."

Shidan glanced aside, saddened. "We loved him. We wished him to stay. But he was so very tired." Clawed fingers curled. "There are worse ways to die than fighting."

Iroh's eyes narrowed. "And you seek no vengeance for his death?"

Shidan smiled, slow and fey. "Did I not say we saw death coming, Prince Iroh? Our vengeance sits beside you. Azulon's blood, who will never follow Azulon's will. Azulon's grandchild, *Makoto's* blood, who wants nothing of the war they have made. We *are* avenged." His smile softened. "And we are blessed, and grateful. We thought we knew the risks of joining our blood to the Fire Lord's line. We were wrong. Terribly wrong. For years, despite all our healing, despite Shirotona's protection... it is so easy for spirits to still a life before it is truly begun."

"Chihisen couldn't bear," Zuko whispered.

"Ursa was next eldest of our children," Shidan nodded. "One child as a prince's heir. One for Byakko. Just as Azulon had planned, to bring us to heel at last." He smirked. "A pity for Ozai he never grasped the true importance of that plan."

Iroh straightened. "Zuko was exiled..."

"And we were, finally, able to set enough defenses," Shidan finished. "Even so, we knew we were at great risk, and then-" He looked at Zuko, deep and warm. "And then Ozai had but *one* living heir, with none left for Byakko. The spirits were distracted. Early; too early, had we a breath less skill at healing. But we knew we would have no better chance."

"I was dead," Zuko managed. "I was - really gone..."

"Just long enough." Joy radiated from Shidan like flame. "Your aunt, Chihisen, is safe delivered of a daughter by her husband, Tsubasa. Haruko has met the dawn for over a full round of the moon, and is accepted of Shirotona." The dragon chuckled. "She has very strong lungs."

Byakko is safe.

Well, not safe; nothing was ever *safe*. But Lady Kotone had two heirs in the direct line now, daughter and granddaughter. Any move the Fire Lord might make would be glaringly obvious.

And right now, my father's got bigger problems.

From Uncle's nod, he'd considered that as well. "My brother may know that his forces are better spent resisting the Avatar, but he will hear of your presence among us. You have put Byakko at great risk."

"We have taken precautions," Shidan shrugged. "I am here. Kotone is not. And like Kuzon before me, I am often seen in unsavory company." He sobered. "There is no more time, General. All the signs are of danger, and death. To do nothing would only mean we perished later. If Byakko is to live, if our people are to survive, we *must* act."

Iroh frowned. "Agni has spoken?"

"Agni does not speak near as often as the Fire Sages imply," Shidan said dryly. "Even to those of dragon's blood. As you should well know, General."

Silence. Zuko snuck a glance at his uncle, taking in the rare sight of surprise on Iroh's face. "I don't think he does. Azulon didn't talk about family much."

...And it was wrong to gloat. Very wrong. But he couldn't help wondering how Uncle liked having *his* world yanked out from under him.

Bad nephew. Behave. "So what should we do if Great-Grandmother shows up? Besides run."

"Running would be wise," Shidan agreed. "Beyond that, use water and earth. Makoto is of fire, only; the dark fire, but fire all the same."

"Sozin's companion is dead and gone," Iroh said sharply. "He died - was *killed* - before Azulon was born. It is what began the tradition of dragonslaying."

"Ah? And did Fire Lady Tejjina tell you that?" Shidan's whiskers twitched. "I am curious. Does Azula truly resemble her mother so much, you could not see your grandmother in her?"

"Her body was in her chambers!"

"A body, I am sure," Shidan said dryly. "Hers? I imagine the charring was too horrid to tell. Was it not?"

"*Stop it,*" Zuko hissed.

Startled, the two older firebenders broke off their glaring and glanced at him.

"Just stop," Zuko said raggedly. "Grandfather. I know you hate Makoto. I *know*. And you made sure Mom married my father anyway, even though you knew - you *knew!* - we'd all be crazy. I don't *understand* people. I try and I try and I *don't*. And that's your fault." He focused on the other half of the problem. "Uncle. You know the records. You should know better than anyone what they mean. Fire Lady Atsuko *vanished* when Zouge died."

"But that cannot-"

"It *is*," Zuko insisted. "Sozin was a dragon-child. Azulon was a dragon-child *twice*. And if you didn't have all the luck in the world, to take after Grandmother Ilah-" He winced. "We're not *right*, Uncle. Azula. Father. Me. And you've got to stop thinking it's your fault. You *didn't know*. I remember Lu Ten. He would have made a great Fire Lord. You taught him that. And you couldn't teach me, and... it just *is*, Uncle." He swallowed. "Great-Grandfather lied. I'm sorry."

"Nephew," Iroh began, stricken.

Zuko held up a hand; *stop*. "Grandfather. No evasions. No omissions. Why are you here? Why come to find us *now*, when we're running from the whole Fire Nation to jam the Avatar Spirit between a rock and a hard place?"

"Is that what you are doing?" For a creature supposedly more in touch with the spirits than any human could be, Shidan looked downright intrigued.

"No, it is not," Iroh said firmly. "We defy Kyoshi's decree, indeed. And we will build a place of safety for our people, where airbending can rise again. But to think one could ever dictate terms to the spirit of the world..." Iroh shook his head. "Zuko. He is young. He will listen to reason."

Zuko gave him a *look*.

"In a few years," Iroh amended. "But he will understand what we are doing, and he is kind. He will have no reason to act against us. And whatever blame you believe he bears for the North Pole, you have no reason to threaten him."

...I am not going to set this table on fire.

Shidan cleared his throat. "We *are* speaking of Aang? Gyatso's student?" At Iroh's nod, he sighed. "I am only a dragon, and my lady's beloved, and ever bewildered by humans. But I think you give the boy too much credit."

"Do I?" Iroh looked unconvinced.

"General. I *knew* Aang."

Whatever Iroh had been about to say, he apparently thought better of it. "I have rarely seen the boy when he was not pursued by enemies. My nephew, or others. But he has seemed quite brave. He has rescued Zuko. Twice."

Zuko reddened. "Pohuai Stronghold doesn't count. I went in to rescue *him*."

"And the polar ice?" Iroh raised a gray brow.

"...All right, that counts." Which still stung, damn it.

"I have never doubted Aang's bravery," Shidan said gravely. "A cowardly child would flee. He would never still seek to face the Fire Nation, after all he has seen. No. It is his kindness, his tolerance, that I doubt. How are the sons and daughters of fire to win honor and respect from one who sees dragons as no more than sky bison?"

Silence, as sunlight caught glittering motes of dust. Iroh scattered them with a heavy breath. "You are certain?"

"Time after time I would show him images, and never did he shift in his images of me," Shidan nodded. "Kuzon's *animal companion*, he believed. No more."

"It is not a heritage we speak of with outsiders," Iroh pointed out.

"Heritage or not, a boy who cannot recognize the fact that Kuzon would spread scrolls for *both* of us to read is missing the obvious," Shidan said dryly. "Leave aside that willful ignorance. If Sozin had not seized his chance with Joetsu and the comet, I well believe *Aang* would have started the war."

"Not on purpose," Zuko protested. Yes, Aang could be an *idiot*, but - oh. Right.

"No. Not on purpose," Shidan agreed, whiskers bent in wry, bleak humor. "He simply assumes those who speak *a* truth speak *the* truth, and all of it. And that those he favors are wholly in the right."

"A flaw of the young," Iroh observed. "Hardly enough to start a war."

"More than enough," Shidan countered, "with the Face-Stealer setting snares at every turn."

Zuko shivered.

Iroh caught that, and frowned. Looked Shidan in the eye. "We will speak more of this."

Great. Talk about the spirit that wants us all to die horribly-

"Alone."

What? Uncle, you wouldn't-!

On the other side of a firmly shut hatch, Zuko took in the fact that Uncle most certainly *would*.

You can't do this to me! I am-

Sixteen. Not lord of Byakko. Certainly not a crown prince.

He threw me out on my ship!

Jee's ship, to be specific. For what Uncle thought was a good reason.

I need to think about this.

He couldn't think angry. He *knew* that.

And there might be something Shidan didn't want him to know, without prepared, friendly arms ready to catch him.

He said Mom was wounded. That Ozai hurt her...

One grandfather had ordered his death, twice. The other wanted his father dead.

It's official. Today sucks.

Deep, slow breath. In and out. Use the training.

And in the absence of orders to the contrary - go find something and kill it.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Zuko quoted Rommel. Heh. The Desert Fox and the Fire Nation army? Talk about fitting like a glove... which also includes some of Rommel's very bad habits, like being so eager to attack he kept outrunning his supply lines.

Another Rommel quote fits the whole mess Sozin started, and illuminates part of why he started it: "Anyone who has to fight, even with the most modern weapons, against an enemy in complete command of the air, fights like a savage against modern European troops, under the same handicaps and with the same chances of success."

Before anyone invokes Godwin's Law, please Wiki Erwin Rommel. He was on the wrong side, but even his enemies agreed he was a decent man. I can see the younger Dragon of the West, before the siege of Ba Sing Se, being a lot like him. Or like General George S. Patton. "Fixed fortifications are a monument to the stupidity of man," indeed. And though he was on the right side, never forget the man also said this: "May God have mercy upon my enemies, because I won't."

("Have taken Trier with two divisions. What do you want me to do? Give it back?" Oh man, I could so see a young Iroh sending that back to Azulon when the Fire Lord said taking a town was impossible...)

About Embers TVTropes page - Troperiffic. (Insert writer giggling here.) Well, yes.

Intentionally. ATLA hit so many itself, you can't swing a fanfic without KO'ing a swath of them. And they're fun.

Finally, this may qualify as a minor rant, but what the heck... One theme in some reviews goes along the general lines of, "if Zuko really thinks he's a good guy, why doesn't he help Aang - who is, after all, the Spirit of the World and will do what's best?"

There's a trope to describe someone who turns their back on their own society and government, actively works to destroy it, and leaves it at the mercy of non-related outsiders. Especially in community-based, clan-based, and tribal cultures. That trope is Too Dumb To Live.

If Zuko didn't believe in his own people, didn't believe, heart and soul, that their ways really matter, he'd never have hunted for Aang for three years. He did. He does. A Knight in Sour Armor believes in the rules and breaks them only when necessary.

Setting up an outside domain is not destroying the Fire Nation. It's recreating what used to be a working system in the first place. On top of that, it's setting up a domain with Earth King Kuei's permission to be there - meaning part of the Fire Nation is, currently, out of the war. Which does help Aang.

Granted, it's a very small part of the Fire Nation. After all, one teenager with a vision and a few people to help? Starting small is pretty much a given... oh, wait. (Insert Aside Glance at the Avatar... AKA in tropes terms, The Messiah.)

And while I'm throwing in tropes, here's a few that Zuko has reason to think describe Aang: Black and White Morality, The Pollyanna, Well Intentioned Extremist, Good is Dumb, Hero Ball, Idiot Hero, Stupid Good. And, of course, Too Dumb To Live.

Aang is triumphantly hailed as the returning Avatar. That Spirit who - people believe - really knows best for the world. And then proceeded to wipe out a large chunk of Zuko's people.

And given he has every intention of overthrowing Ozai, he doesn't plan to be slowing down any time soon.

Zuko is not, and never will be, a saint. The war has to be stopped? Good idea. Fire Nation people are going to have to die to stop it? Awful idea. It may well be necessary, but that doesn't make it any less awful to the young man who was raised to lead and protect them.

The only way Zuko would ever accept joining Aang - not be happy about it, but accept it - is if he really believed joining Aang would cut down the body count. So far, he has no proof of that.

Is that fair to Aang? Possibly not. But Aang - from Zuko's point of view - has no one depending on him. He has no relatives, no clan, no binding oaths. He has no forces to lead. No one who relies on him to make the best decisions, the ones that keep them alive. Note in the Gaang, Sokka is the Idea Guy. And on top of all that, Aang doesn't feel compelled to tell the truth.

Which means Zuko would be looking at any potential alliance as just another chance for Aang to say, "Whoops, that's not what I really meant."

Meaning Aang risks nothing by just using him, and Zuko risks everything.

Paranoid? Sure. If you'd had half your face burned off by your father, and large sections of the world trying to kill you ever since, wouldn't you be?

What worries Zuko is, is he paranoid *enough*?

Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

Xiāo yāo jīng: xiāo - long-legged spider, yāo jīng - evil spirit; alluring woman. This is, of course, an expy of the Japanese youkai, the jorōgumo. According to Wikipedia, that's written as "絡新婦" ("binding lady") or "女郎蜘蛛" ("whore spider"). One of the forms it takes is a young woman carrying a "baby"; the spider's eggsack.

Fēnglàngshāo: (風浪 风浪 fēng làng (n) wind and waves; storm tossed sea. 蛸 shāo long-legged spider; one of the original Japanese terms for octopus I ran across was "sea spider".) Expy of the Akkorokamui, (アツコロカムイ) a gigantic octopus-like monster from Ainu folklore.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Walking meditation." Surrounded by firebenders on *Suzuran's* stern, Jinhai clinging to him, Tingzhe regarded the lit candle in his grasp with some bemusement. He and Shirong already had to shield theirs from the wind of the ship's passage north; that Lieutenant Teruko's burned slow and steady spoke volumes. "We have it in earthbending as well, though I doubt it's for the same purposes."

"It's about the union of opposites, right? Um. Professor," Private Sukekuni added, at just the slightest glance from Sergeant Kyo.

"Correct," Tingzhe nodded, intrigued. "Where did you learn that? I had been under the impression that most of the Fire Nation considered other forms of bending... uncivilized."

"Well, ah..."

"As Colonel Piandao once said," Corporal Shoni stated, studying one of his knives' edges, "you are just as dead if they kill you with a pointy stick."

"Ah," Tingzhe said dryly. *Well, and what did you expect?* he told himself wryly. *Yijiao was little different when he was on the Wall. The enemy is the enemy, even if you may respect them.*

"Well, that and I used to listen in while General Iroh - um - showed people how to play Pai Sho," Sukekuni said in a rush. "He'd talk about other bending styles, and how they were tied in with strategies. It kind of stuck."

"Losing a week's pay tends to do that," Private Rikiya smirked.

"I did not!"

"*Really.*" Rikiya drew it out, with a grin too broad to be anything but trouble.

"Okay, once! You would've lost a lot more."

"Oh, no." Rikiya's eyes were bright with mischief. "Because I, unlike some I may know, listen to the whispers in the wind. And those whispers say... the general has a rep." He cut a glance across at Tingzhe. "Total tile-shark. Dangerous man."

"Ooo." Private Fushi grinned, bouncing. "So you would have lost a whole *month*."

Rikiya didn't - quite - lose that edge of mischief. "I would not."

Kyo cleared his throat.

"...Which has totally no bearing on the lesson at hand," Rikiya said without missing a beat. "So how does that work with rocks, Professor? I mean, people move. Fire moves. Rock? Kind of doesn't."

"Which is a key point of the meditation," Tingzhe stated. "To bend earth, you must match your will against its tendency to remain in place. Rather like water, from what I have learned from Amaya; though water must be persuaded, not commanded... well, I'm certain we can discuss that at some later date." He frowned, thoughtful. "The walking meditation I know serves two main purposes. Philosophically, to consider the paradox of motion in motionlessness. More practically, to accustom a student to simply moving stone. Never mind that it is muscle and bone which do the work. What mind and body work together to accomplish, bending will do."

Jinhai was watching him, fingers slowly easing their death-grip on his robes. Risked looking straight at Kyo. "Cousin Lee never did that."

"Tight quarters on the *Wani*," the sergeant said, unfazed. "He probably got out of the habit." Kyo raised a gray brow. "But next time, ask your teacher, little guy."

"Huh?" Startled, Jinhai looked at Teruko. "But..."

She's a girl! was written all over his son's face, Tingzhe thought ruefully. Though at least he hadn't *said* it.

"So the rumors are true?" Shirong's face was calm, but already Tingzhe had begun to be familiar with that attentive twitch that was the Dai Li's *Aha! I knew it!* "The Fire Army has some female instructors?"

For a moment, Tingzhe imagined, you could have heard a pin drop.

Rikiya twitched first. "Some." Half a cough; half a laugh. "Yeah, I'd say - what is it, four out of five, Boss? Yeah, that's... pretty much *some*."

Tingzhe tried not to stare.

"Combat bending instruction's done by the Home Guard," Teruko informed Shirong. "Most of them are women or retired veterans. Sometimes both. Though not many women go for the Marines or the Navy. Private Fushi and I are kind of odd turtle-ducks." She eyed Jinhai. "Your cousin's first firebending teacher was his mother. Trust me, you would not want to cross Lady Ursa. She could singe a fly off a moon-peach at a hundred paces. I grant you she's not as scary as the general, but there's only a handful of firebenders in the *world* as scary as General Iroh."

"One of those being the Fire Lord," Shirong said soberly.

That brought quiet, and a handful of uneasy looks. But Teruko squared her shoulders, and nodded. "Let's put it this way, Agent Shirong. Stories say the tunnels under the capital are full of lava. They also say the Fire Lord can walk *through* them, any damn where he wants."

"Lieutenant," Tingzhe said mildly, hand on his son's shoulder.

"Sorry, Professor." She gestured for Jinhai to take his candle. "This isn't too far off how your father's meditation works. The point is to get used to moving fire while you're moving. Part of the trick is learning how to make the flame feed itself. So you take advantage of the breeze, and it doesn't get snuffed out."

Jinhai nodded, evidently determined to take this seriously even if Teruko was a girl. "So if it goes out, I lose?"

"This isn't a contest," Teruko said firmly. "No matter what you see Rikiya and Sukekuni doing."

Behind her, both firebenders suddenly tried to look innocent.

"Just keep it lit, and walk," she went on. "If it goes out, light it again. And keep walking." She smiled, gold eyes warm. "Trust me, it only looks boring. When you start figuring out how the wind plays into it? It gets *interesting*."

Candle in hand, she started walking.

Sitting on the deck by a bit of rock he'd brought up from below, Tingzhe watched.

Hmm. She has done this before.

He could see it in the way she kept an eye on Shirong and Jinhai without seeming to, only stepping in with a quiet *turn more this way*, or *work with the wind*. And, every once in a while, *good*.

Jinhai, Tingzhe was sure, was convinced she had eyes in the back of her head.

Nothing so mystical, the professor smirked, eyeing the one firebender sharpening blades with Shoni instead of practicing with the rest. "So you're the spotter?"

"Don't train a firebender without one," Sergeant Kyo nodded.

"Lee did," Tingzhe observed.

Kyo gave him a serious look. "He have a choice in the matter?"

"No," Tingzhe admitted, absently carving off a slice of stone to crush into sand. "And he always made certain there was someone else with him. And a sand-bucket."

"Lousy setup if you've got other options. Otherwise - not bad." Kyo gave him a considering look. "You have something against that rock, Professor?"

How best to put it? Was there any good way to put it? Likely not. "You all seem... very sane."

"For bad guys?" Kyo's smile was dry. "Blame the captain. He spent months with the general. It rubs off." An armored shrug. "Last winter this was a pretty sorry bunch. Morale was shot. We weren't even a crew. Just a bunch of sailors nobody wanted, jammed onto one ship. So if somebody screwed up, we'd be the only ones who went to the bottom."

"Ah." Ruthlessly pragmatic, Tingzhe thought. Which far better fit the skull-faced armor of his nightmares. "But Captain Jee changed that?"

"Captain's stepped into a few messes himself," Kyo observed. "Got stuck with the exiled prince. Which was about one step up from getting tossed out of the Navy the hard way."

Tingzhe frowned. "The hard way?"

"You don't want to know."

Unsettling. Which, ironically, calmed him; the Fire Nation's military was *supposed* to be unnerving. Not friendly.

"Captain doesn't talk about it much, but the prince made him think twice," Kyo went on. "Screw-up, maybe. But the prince *worked*. And if he couldn't carry out his orders the way he was supposed to... well, sometimes the prince found another way."

"Training a firebender with hot water," Tingzhe murmured.

Studying his men's form, Kyo gave him a swift glance. Raised a brow.

Amused, Tingzhe nodded.

"...We have to pick that kid's brains." Kyo chuckled wryly. "Like that, Professor. The captain wants good order and discipline, and the ship running at the end of the day. Outside of that? How we get the job done is up to us."

Tingzhe's brows went up. "So you do have reason to protect the prince."

Kyo gave him a thoughtful glance. "You teach the advanced classes, Professor?"

"Yes, actually," Tingzhe admitted. "Are there facts I lack, that would make my conclusion incorrect?"

"Nope." Kyo looked a little smug. "Though Corporal Shoni's had to pound the reasons into a few heads."

"We take oaths to protect the Fire Nation." Shoni carefully buffed one of his smaller blades. "One of our greatest tacticians, who was correct when he warned of the dangers of spirits in the North, says spirits intend to destroy our nation." Shoni looked up. "The Fire Nation is not walls, or ships, or even islands. It is our people. It is fire, and the blood of dragons. So we will follow our oaths to the Fire Lord, and defend our people." Steel slipped out of sight. "If exile is the price of that oath? We will pay it."

Stubborn as the walls of Ba Sing Se, Tingzhe thought. And clenched sand into stone, to fight that wave of longing for *home*.

Home is not a place. It is my family. My wife. My children. My brother. The people who made us welcome.

The *Fire Nation's* definition of home. Oma and Shu, what had he done?

What I had to. What I chose, for my clan. Spirits, why am I even considering this? It's far too late to back out now.

He knew why. Unfortunately.

"Something bothering you, Professor?" Kyo's polite sidelong glance was clear statement he knew something was - but he'd take *none of your business* for an answer.

And I know that, because I know Meixiang's silences, Tingzhe realized. *I know the woman I love.*

"How do you deal with it, Sergeant? With... the dragon?"

"Huh." Kyo mulled that. "Most of us don't have it as bad as the lieutenant. Definitely not as bad as

the prince. Dragon-child," he elaborated at Tingzhe's raised brow. "Bad temper, hates to be backed into a corner, hates it more if they can't see the sky. Remember that, and that they're the last people you pick as a diplomat, and you're okay." A faint smile. "Best people in a fight. And they're really sweet kids. Like little kitten-owlets. Mess with their kids, though - better have your will written. If Lady Ursa'd been in the Fire Nation three years ago, we might be short one son of Azulon."

Tingzhe glanced at Shoni.

"Captain Jee has made known the circumstances of the prince's injuries," the corporal said precisely. "Of course, one cannot criticize the Fire Lord. He is the leader of the Fire Sages, who interpret Agni's will on earth."

An interesting and deliberate pause, there. "Of course," Tingzhe murmured.

"But under most circumstances, it would not be unreasonable to accept a surrender at the beginning of a duel," Shoni observed.

"Ah." Tingzhe thought furiously. "Bear in mind that I am from Ba Sing Se, and so far from certain what I do *not* know about the Fire Nation. A thirteen-year-old is old enough to fight, and suffer the consequences?"

"For honor," Kyo nodded. "You don't ship them out to the Earth Kingdom until they've got more training. And a bit more brains."

"I have also been told that it is a parent's duty to haul a child away from a fire too hot to handle," Tingzhe said cautiously.

"So it is," Shoni agreed. "Particularly among the great names. Of course, they cannot tolerate fools among their children. And only a fool would deliberately show disrespect to the Fire Lord."

Enough evasions. "You know he did not," Tingzhe challenged.

"We're here," Kyo said levelly.

Not good enough. "It's inhuman," Tingzhe said bitterly.

Kyo's eyes narrowed. "That what you really think, professor?"

My family. My son. Jinhai's candle had just blown out yet again; the boy looked ready to throw beeswax to the deck and *stomp* on it-

Then Jinhai looked at him. And heaved a dramatic sigh, and pinched the wick, determined, until it lit again.

Tingzhe smiled. Held it, until Jinhai turned away, before surrendering to that awful, bone-weary worry. "I... don't know."

"Looks like a good kid," Kyo said softly.

"He was a surprise," Tingzhe admitted. "Even before the firebending." Belatedly, a thought struck him. "Do you have children?"

"Had." Old grief, worn as wind-smoothed stone. "Bandits."

"I'm sorry." He was, Tingzhe admitted to himself with some surprise. Enemy soldier the sergeant might have been, but loss... that, they had in common.

Even if he's not human. Do dragons go to war? Betray one another? Grieve their children?

He didn't know. He desperately wanted to know.

Shoni snorted. "What the sergeant is not saying, is that you have said nothing that would require such a long face, Professor. That was not a request for aid. His vendetta has been carried out, and is over." Shoni rolled his eyes. "Despite possible orders that the situation might be considered too delicate to pursue, as the bandits had retreated deep into the Earth Kingdom, almost to Omashu." A sharp-edged smile. "Almost. But not quite."

Tingzhe eyed them both.

Kyo gave him a wry grin. "And now you know why my squad's on this ship."

"Years ago," Shoni sniffed, waving it off.

"Command doesn't forget a whole team going AWOL," Kyo said dryly. "No matter how well Fushi and Rikiya cooked the books." He scowled.

"They would do it again, and you know it, sir," Shoni replied. "There is law, and there are orders. And there is what is right."

As there had been in Ba Sing Se, Tingzhe reflected. With the Dai Li.

Kyo shook off memories, and straightened. "Ought to stop second-guessing yourself, Professor. Especially when you're right. We're not all human."

Tingzhe tensed.

"We are hunters, like our kin," Shoni nodded. "You who bend earth, or air, or water - what you seek exists, of itself, and is sufficient. But fire must burn."

"I've seen you create-" Tingzhe cut himself off, recalling Lee's lessons. "Of course. If there is nothing to burn, then you fuel it with your own chi." And the reserves that must take, the sheer amount of energy drawn from a living body; spirits, it wasn't-

It isn't human.

"How do you reconcile that in yourselves?" Tingzhe wondered. "How... what must that first firebender have been thinking, to join with something - not of our world?"

Shoni and Kyo traded a look. "If the tales are true," Shoni offered, "it is humans who are not of this world."

"We... what?"

"That's the old stories," Kyo nodded. "This is the spirits' playground. The dragons' world. Sky bison, badger-moles, canyon crawlers - they live here, and the spirits look after them. Then one day, humans showed up. And not all the spirits were happy about it."

"Showed up," Tingzhe echoed thoughtfully.

"It *is* a story," Shoni shrugged. "Perhaps the ancients only meant that humans were created later than other creatures. The old stories do not always make sense..." He trailed off, at the slight *shushing* motion of Tingzhe's hand.

"Professor?" Kyo ventured, after a few minutes' silence.

"I am an archaeologist, by training," Tingzhe began. "I do much of my work in archives, true, but I also do a fair amount of digging in the dirt. When I was a young man, before the war had surrounded us, I made several long trips outside Ba Sing Se." He paused, gathering his thoughts. "You can trace a town's growth in the earth. Below streets are centuries of trails, and below houses old farms, and below even that traces of fish-drying posts, or nut storage pits, or... spirits, any number of things. But Ba Sing Se... the city is old. Very, very old. The most ancient parts of the city are caverns deep within the earth itself, and in those caves-" He had to hesitate. "Understand, we are earthbenders, and much may have been reshaped over the millennia. But I believe I know the signs of such work. And if what I saw in those caverns was accurate - Ba Sing Se did not begin as a settlement. It began as a city, a *tremendous* city, all at once."

Silence. Shoni rubbed at the back of his neck, as if the hairs there were standing straight up.

"I could be wrong," Tingzhe observed. "I would dearly love to spend time in one of your archives."

"Ask the prince," Kyo advised, after mulling that over a moment. "We've got what the Earth King handed over. I'd bet he'd love to add to the hoard... here he comes." He waved a hand toward Lieutenant Teruko, that even Tingzhe could see meant *look out*.

"Sir." Teruko brought the walk to a halt as Zuko approached, inclining her head.

"Carry on," Zuko said raggedly.

Spirits. He looks awful, Tingzhe thought. Not quite as bad as that frightening day the young man had laughed about his own maiming. But bad enough.

"Jinhai needs a break." Teruko shooed the boy Tingzhe's way. "Rest with your father. Get warmed up. Meditation's a lot harder than it looks."

Privately amused, Tingzhe wrapped robed arms around his youngest. Who was a bit chilled, by his shivers. *Neatly done*.

"What happened," Shirong asked bluntly, "and how lethal is it likely to be?"

Zuko blinked, as if the question had come from far away. Shook himself, like shedding water. "I think if my grandfather and my uncle decide to maim each other, I'm going to let them. And pick up the pieces afterward."

The marines stiffened. "They're fighting, sir?" Teruko asked swiftly.

"Arguing, I would guess," Shirong stated. "What happened?"

Zuko opened his mouth. closed it. Clenched fists, with just a spark of flame, and took a deep breath. "My mother's alive."

"Um... yes, sir," Teruko said cautiously. "We knew that."

...*Oh dear*, Tingzhe winced.

"You knew that," Zuko echoed, edged and chill. "Well. It's nice to know all of Byakko knew something no one told me *for six years*."

"Daddy?" Jinhai whispered against his chest.

"Shh," Tingzhe murmured. "He's not angry at you."

"You didn't...?" Teruko paled. "Sir. She's Shidan's daughter. Your mother. You'll *know* if she dies."

That made the scholar in Tingzhe prick up his ears. *They know? How?* Certainly, nobles and powerful earthbenders felt when another name had to be carved in the family tablets. But how on earth could that work with fire?

"No one told me that."

Simple words. Controlled words. But the rage and grief beat against him like waves, and Tingzhe had to catch his breath.

"Sir. You'll know." Teruko held out a hand, palm up and empty. "A lot of us aren't that lucky. But strong firebenders? When one of our clan's fires die, when their spirit leaves us... we know." She lowered her voice. "No one ever told you, sir?"

For a moment, a bitter smile shadowed Zuko's face; then calm settled like snow. "Thank you, Lieutenant. It's good to understand what my uncle went through six years ago."

"Sir?" Teruko had the wary air of someone sure she'd missed something.

A few feet away, Tingzhe caught Shirong's wince. *What? Why?*

In the Fire Nation, Shirong and Meixiang had both told him, *so much hinges on what you don't say*.

If he says General Iroh suffered six years ago, he implies he did not, Tingzhe realized. *From all I can tell he adored his cousin, so they would have been clan-* oh.

Oh, indeed. And *damn*. Shirong had told their family of that battle atop the train, in terse but vivid detail. How could anyone who'd lived through that believe-?

Zuko stepped back from that hand, and nodded. "As you were."

Shirong's eyes narrowed. "I believe the lieutenant was about to start sparring practice."

Stalking away, Zuko didn't slow down. "That would be why I'm clearing the deck. Enjoy."

"I see there are distinct disadvantages to a chain of command," Shirong mused. "If you don't come back here, I'm going to start pegging rocks at you."

Marines tensed. Didn't move, as Teruko raised an eyebrow.

Zuko stopped. Took a deliberate breath. "I've read Captain Jee's file on the lieutenant, Agent Shirong. You should take advantage of skilled instruction when it's available." Jaw set, he kept walking.

"I can't believe I'm going to have to do this," Shirong grumbled, heading for Tingzhe's rock. "Professor? I suggest you take cover."

"Sukekuni," Kyo stated. "Rikiya."

"Blast shields-"

"-Extra ammo, on it!"

Before he could blink, Tingzhe found himself and Jinhai yanked behind an iron plate Sukekuni had pulled up and locked into place. With a rattle that sounded like - why was Rikiya dumping *coal* on the deck?

Oh. My.

"Professor," Sukekuni panted, the panel was *not* light, "are Dai Li all crazy?"

Stone gloves whistled through air; there was a sudden, snarling yell-

Tingzhe watched flashes of fire over iron, and smiled, even as his heart raced. "I wouldn't be at all surprised."

It's quiet, Jee thought darkly, blowing warm air on ink to dry it before tucking the ship's log back into its niche on the bridge. Tobito had the helm, Lieutenant Sadao was making sure everyone aboard had at least a corner to call their own, Captain Donghai had just returned one of their hawks to affirm the fleet didn't have any problems a few drunken nights in port couldn't solve, and Prince Zuko was handling the dragon.

...Which made him shake his head. Again. A dragon. On his ship.

It's quiet. Too quiet. I wonder what Lieutenant Teruko-

Fire boomed.

Ah, yes. There.

On the one hand, if he didn't see it, he didn't know about it. Officially. On the other, Sergeant Kyo's crew had been quietly effective in persuading some of his more stubborn sailors to actually consider the realities of the prince's situation. If they'd suddenly come up against something that required a less subtle approach, they might need a hand.

Or, they could be just practicing.

Curiosity fought common sense, and won with the third fireball.

Retreating to the rear of the command tower, Jee peered past smokestacks to the stern. *Coal. On my decks? I don't care what Rikiya says he needed it for, this time the squad is scrubbing the plates down with used ink-brushes- oh.*

A sweep of green-clad arms, and a coal wave intercepted a fireball. Crushed together in a ball to snuff out sparks, then surged like a scorpion-viper after the firebender who'd challenged it.

The motion was blurred by green robes instead of red armor, but in that leap and twist away, Jee recognized the form he'd seen the prince drill a hundred times.

Always the same problem. He'll break his root in a heartbeat to get into the air.

Yet against an earthbender, the air was where Zuko apparently wanted to be. Which didn't quite make sense-

Watching Shirong fight, Jee let out a hiss of breath. *I'm a fool.*

What had Teruko and General Iroh told him about Lady Bei Fong? She *read the ground*.

Barefoot soldiers, Jee thought grimly. I fight from the sea; I've always stayed as far off Earth Kingdom soil as I can. But the prince fights on land.

Earthbenders draw their strength from the ground. Their chi is the heart of the earth, and they move that energy up. From their roots.

The farther you were from your enemy's source of chi, the more of his own strength he had to spend to strike. That was how earthbender prisons worked at all; keep them *away* from earth. Keep them weak.

Feet on the ground can be trapped, Jee realized, watching Zuko execute a heel-spin to sweep away bonds of coal like paper. A stance that touches earth - or metal - can be felt.

Three years exiled from the Fire Nation. Crossing the world on a quest everyone knew was hopeless. Crossing the Earth Kingdom, which meant fighting earthbenders.

Intrigued, Jee settled in to watch.

When this is over, Shirong thought, skidding aside from yet another slicing blast of fire, I owe Rikiya a drink.

He'd proposed this little experiment to Lieutenant Teruko with the idea that he'd just be using the rocks scattered on the deck. After which she'd given him a look generally reserved for drunks and small children with hammers, and proceeded to outline exactly what level of lethal skill one could expect from an imperial firebender.

...Eep.

Hence the coal. And stern advice to keep Zuko at a distance. Coupled with strict instructions to *yield* if the fight turned ugly. Jee would never let either of them live it down if he were sloppy enough to-

Ack!

One moment the young firebender had been poised, ready to jump away from fists of stone yet again. The next, Zuko's sliding skid took Shirong's feet out from under him in a wave of flame.

Get his ankles, immobilize - uh-oh.

Lethal feet whipped out of reach, as bare hands slapped the deck and torqued his opponent away in a spin that looked oddly familiar-

Splash.

Should have expected that, Shirong reflected, gripped in ice. Why am I still surprised?

Rolling to his feet, Zuko deliberately slowed his breathing. Lifted a hand, and let it sink gracefully down, melting ice away. Waited for the agent to stand, and bowed.

Shaking off a few stray drops, Shirong grinned wryly. And prepared to do something even more lethal than sparring with an angry firebender. "As I've been trying to tell the lieutenant, when it comes to bending, you're fearless. If it's anything *but* fire."

Zuko stiffened.

"Lieutenant Teruko's trying to help," Shirong said quickly. "So sit on that temper. I know it takes a lot of sitting on, but *listen*."

Please listen. I know I'm right. But we can't help if you won't believe.

A slow jerk of a nod. "Lieutenant," Zuko said stiffly. "Explain."

Teruko stood straight and correct. "Sir. I think you should hear Agent Shirong out."

...Oh, thanks.

At least he had Zuko's attention. "I was sixteen when the last Earth King was assassinated," Shirong stated, painfully aware of listening ears. This wasn't going to be easy. "Just a trainee, called out when the city went dark and everything went insane." Screams, running in the streets, fires that burned green without ever casting light...

Breathe. It's over.

"I ended up separated from my mentor, which was bad. But I kept trying to do my job. Which turned out to be worse."

Pale hands, a sweep of hair like black silk, and elegant weeping...

"It was a fountain square. Everyone else was running from... well, all kinds of things. But I stopped. I saw a woman sitting on the bench, rocking her baby, numb to the world. Or so it seemed." *Breathe. Go on.* "She saw me. Just- came into focus, eyes waking up. I was sure she'd snap out of it and start moving with the rest of the civilians. Instead, she put her... bundle down on the bench, took a biwa off her shoulder, and started playing. So I went over to talk to her." Shirong paused, looking back on that long-ago stupidity. How could he have missed her hair, her too-fine, too-revealing clothing? The way the bundle *squirmed*, like no human form could move?

Young and stupid. It happens.

Gold eyes were focused on him. Listening.

"In fact, she was playing for her children," Shirong said dryly. Remembering shadows of a sharp-edged smile, coils of trapping silk, and pain. "Lots and lots of little, eight-legged... offspring."

"Oh, boy," Fushi whispered, eyes wide. "*Jorōgumo!*"

"We call them *xiāo yāo jīng*," Shirong said, trying not to shake at the memory. "The spider-woman. She wrapped me up in silk over water before I could blink, and then - you know what spiderlings do with prey."

It's over. Put it away. Do not think about it.

"I got lucky, for the last time in my life." Shirong tried to stuff the nightmares back into their cage, remembering *after*. "Long Feng had secured a guard around Earth King Kuei, and was leading teams out to smash some of the worst intruding spirits. He found me before I'd been quite drained dry." *Keep going. It's daylight. Nothing can touch you here.* "I don't know how he handled the *xiāo yāo jīng*, but I know it was lethal. I felt her fangs pull out of my spirit. That's the last thing I remember of that night." *Just a little more. You can do this.* "The next I knew, I was waking up in Amaya's garden at sunrise. There were too many injured, you see; she had to stuff us in everywhere..." He swallowed. "I've never seen anything as beautiful as that dawn."

Iroh thinks La's been watching Zuko since he was born. How long have you been watching me, Agni?

"Amaya's good, but there are limits," Shirong went on, voice level. "I carry those scars, and the death that almost had me. And I would have done *anything* for Long Feng. Not just because he saved my life. Because I know what's out there, I've *fought* it - and he saved our city from those nightmares." The agent's hands were trembling. He forced them still. "For Long Feng, I would have faced any foe. Even Azula. But to this day, I can't hear a biwa without breaking into a cold sweat."

There. My nightmare, spread before you like silk for painting.

What will you do, young friend?

"I'm sorry," Zuko whispered.

"Don't be sorry," Shirong said firmly. "I refuse to let the fear rule me. Ever. But it's a scar on my soul. It's a weakness in my defenses, and I have to plan for it. I *flinch*. And that has nothing to do with courage. It's pain, and the memory of pain. Instinct remembers the threat of death, and tells us to run before our minds can catch up. Before we can *think*, and realize that running is the last thing we should do." His eyes narrowed. "And it's worse when our minds and feelings are already at war. I was trained to help and protect civilians. So I did. And it nearly killed me. And you..." Shirong eyed the young firebender. *Dragon-child*. "You say you're predators. Guanyin as my witness, you've reminded me of pygmy pumas since we've met. And when a cub makes a parent angry? They go *limp*. They *don't fight*."

Zuko was pale. Trembling.

"Everyone I've spoken to, *everyone*, says surrender was a viable option," Shirong said quietly. *Easy. Easy*. "It should have worked. But it didn't." *Please listen. Just a little longer*. "And because it didn't, because the best decision you could make *failed* - you don't trust your judgment. Not in firebending." He took a deep breath. "I imagine your great-grandfather never encountered anything so crushing to the spirit. Even when he was dying, he knew there was something he could do."

Zuko flinched. But held his ground, pale gold wide and wild.

"You're stronger than Kuzon," Shirong went on. *Agni, if you care, let him hear me*. "He burned to the last, until he burned out. You were crushed into ashes. But you still fight. You still face firebenders. Spirits, you still faced your sister."

"There isn't any choice," Zuko ground out.

"There's always a choice," Shirong disagreed. "You're just stubborn enough to convince everyone else you don't even think about other options." He paused. "Even your uncle."

"Uncle's not responsible for my failures!"

Oh good, Shirong reflected, deliberately ignoring the flames sprouting from clenched fists. *I finally got him mad enough to fight*.

...Terrific.

But a threat wasn't an attack. Not yet. "It's not a failure to be afraid of what almost killed you!" Shirong snarled back. "It's instinct!" He let out a huff of breath, and shook off the fury. "It's human."

A flat, deadly golden look.

Ah, yes. Human is a bit tricky here, isn't it?

"I don't know if this will help," Shirong admitted, avoiding the problem. "But if we're up against everything Kyoshi and Sozin set in motion, and who knows what else... you say Lieutenant Teruko's a good instructor. Well, show me."

Now it was Teruko's look that promised murder. Shirong smothered a chuckle.

"He's got a point, sir," Teruko said steadily. "General Iroh's one of the best, when it comes to mountain style. Wave style, though... I haven't practiced it much for a few years, but I can help you double-check your stances." Her lips twitched into a wry smile. "Don't take this the wrong way, but Lord Kuzon was a bit taller."

Don't laugh, Shirong told himself firmly. Eyeing the rest of the marines, to find Kyo had beaten him to it; every firebender looked as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths.

"I'm just sorry you never got a chance to meet him," Teruko went on. "Even if he steered clear of Fire Lord Azulon, he would have sent a bloodknot for the welcoming."

Zuko blinked. And seemed to deflate, as if all the anger had drained away. "Oh."

"Bloodknot?" Shirong asked. Noting he wasn't the only one who looked confused; Rikiya had a carefully bland look, while Sukekuni was openly bewildered.

Fushi, on the other hand, was bouncing on her toes, grin wide and eager. "Old family tradition. You don't hear much about it, but everybody does it--"

"Not anymore," Kyo said flatly. "The history books call it one of those outdated superstitions. Which is probably why you two never heard of it." His gaze lingered just a little longer than it had to on Rikiya.

There's a story there, Shirong thought, as Rikiya looked guiltily away. *The way he acts, just a little too casual around power... ambitious relatives?*

"That's just wrong," Fushi insisted. "Family's important." She turned a hopeful look on Shirong. "You got welcomed into your clan, right?"

"Yes," Shirong acknowledged. "It was... very odd." Blood and wine and a *snap* of something locking into his own spirit, a certainty he'd never be lost again...

Oh.

That's what comes from being a lone agent so long. You forget about family. Shirong smirked at himself at the irony. *We spend so much of ourselves doing our duty to protect the city from spirits, we forget others' duties to the spirits. Especially our ancestors.*

So the Fire Nation tied together clan spirits with blood instead of ancestral tablets. Why was he not surprised?

I wonder. The elders named me dead when they knew how unlucky I was. When I joined Wen... did I die twice?

"You send a bloodknot if you can't make it to the party," Fushi shrugged. "Blood and hair, and

they can just burn it and add the ashes. And everything's set."

"Dragons do it with scales," Teruko stated. "Or so I've heard." She gave Zuko a sympathetic look. "Sorry, sir. I keep forgetting your mother had to be careful about what she said. Or did. Parents' fires - you're born with that link. The rest of the clan takes some work."

"Which is Guanyin's mercy," Shirong said bluntly. "We lost a lot of people on that night. Plenty of them nobles. If Kuei had been made known to all his kin's ancestral tablets before then... there are good reasons to keep children from the spirits until they're old enough to handle it. Even family spirits."

Zuko frowned.

Shirong raised an eyebrow. And the other, all but feeling the wince as the marines went silent. "Was it something I said?"

"Um." Sukekuni cleared his throat. "How old did you say the Avatar was?"

Shirong blinked. And swallowed hard, as a sudden warm breeze of summer river-mud curdled his stomach. *Oh, damn.*

"Spirits." *Plop* went a pebble into the numb stillness of the bay. "Sheesh." Another *plop*, as Toph scuffed the fuzziness of sand. "The Avatar must concentrate to properly sense creatures of the world beyond!" Done echoing Tao's grim tones, Toph rolled her eyes. "Duh. So maybe this is new. So maybe he needs some quiet to get started. But he's a *bender*. He can't concentrate when people are flinging rocks at him, he's gonna be toast. Graaah!"

Splash!

Okay, that lump of rock she could still feel in the water. Though it was muted. Like having someone step between her and a fire. You knew it had to still be there, but it didn't feel warm.

Didn't matter. She was plenty hot enough for everyone.

"So we were distracting Aang," Toph grumbled to herself. "Well, duh! We're his friends. We're kind of supposed to. How's Twinkletoes gonna save the world if he's all serious all the time?"

She'd seen Aang serious in the desert. And up against the lake serpent. It wasn't good.

"Sokka," Toph declared to the splash of waves. "Tao ought to be teaching Snoozles about the spirits."

Only Tao didn't think Sokka ought to have anything to do with spirits. After all, he wasn't a bender.

Which had ticked Katara off enough to make her join Sokka on his latest hunting trip. Summer meant snow-berries at the South Pole, and Katara swore she'd smelled something like that on the forest wind.

So Tao had what he wanted. Aang, with no distractions, while the Water Tribe was off being responsible their way.

Which had left Toph to loudly declare sitting around while Aang trained was not her idea of fun, and she'd head out to train herself.

And she was. Already, she had just a little better idea of where rocks ended up in water. She might

have an even better one, *if* she'd just been focusing on the water.

Toes stretched into the sand, Toph felt back towards camp, where Aang and Tao were still sitting while Momo probably flitted through the air. Appa was a solid, breathing weight behind them, heart slow and steady. *Looks okay.*

Not like she didn't trust Tao. She did. Mostly. But Tao was an old guy, he was a *teacher*, and Aang stuck to teachers like iron on loadstone. It was kind of scary.

And she was being snippy about Tao, and she *knew* she was being snippy, because she couldn't come out and ask what she really wanted to know.

Is Sparky okay? Is Uncle?

She'd talked Sokka into asking his dad to spread the word around the Earth Kingdom people helping them that they wanted news from back in the city. Wasn't hard. If Sparky had pulled off something crazy, Sokka wanted to know just as much as she did. So far, the word coming back from Ba Sing Se was stunned with a side of what-were-they-drinking?

Depending on who you asked, the Fire Nation had gone crazier and incinerated the whole trading fleet, families included. Or a swarm of ghosts had destroyed the Earth King's palace. Or a flock of Air Nomad survivors had unleashed a wind storm to punish the Earth Kingdom and the Fire Princess alike. Or the Earth King had forced allegiance from Wan Shi Tong to spirit half the city's army mysteriously away.

Having dealt with the stupid owl-spirit's sinking library, Toph kind of doubted that last one.

But the one that confuzzled Chief Hakoda the most - and still made Toph want to bust out laughing - was the story that, drawn by the Avatar's command, a rampaging northern water spirit had fallen hopelessly in love with the palace specter, and vowed to do battle with her enemies until Ba Sing Se was once more a free city. Complete with flashing dao, spirit-masks, ghost fires, haunted ice-sheathed trains, and all kinds of sneaky derring-do that included spiriting the Earth King right out of Azula's claws.

Oh, she'd laughed herself *sick* on that one.

Though feeling Aang's shocked recoil at dao, masks, and sneaky? Not so funny.

Whichever of the stories were or weren't true, none of them even whispered that Zuko or Uncle had turned up dead. Toph was counting on that being good news.

You hear me, Sparky? That better be good news. Stay in one piece. And give 'em all hell.

So. If Zuko had figured out all new ways to give the spirits a headache, she'd better figure out her own.

Keeps Aang on his toes. And it's fun.

"Salt in water," Toph muttered, dipping her own toes into that endless, fish and seaweed-smelly emptiness. "Must be really *tiny* salt."

There were really tiny earth-bits in metal, too. And she'd made that work.

Yeah, well, I could see those.

She'd bent side by side with Katara on that sludge from the drill. But same deal. Lots of water, but plenty of earth to see. This? Was like standing on the edge of a cliff, with no way to know what she might hit on the way down.

Sparky can wrestle hot glass. There's gotta be a way to do this.

She knew how to do earth. You out-stubborned it until both of you moved. So she'd been trying to out-stubborn the whole bay.

It wasn't working.

Which was *ticking her off*. She could *taste* the salt kicked up in the air every time wind dashed the waves up on shore-

Licking her lips, Toph frowned. *Salt*.

She bent what she "saw". Whether that was rocks in the air or sludge on the ground. But she couldn't see this.

Zuko couldn't see fire in hot water, either. So how'd he do it?

Maybe if she just got a little closer to the water...

Footsteps without feet frantically tangled with hers, pushing her back and away.

Boots? What the-

A slight tremor in the slope of the beach into black. Barely a whisper through her toes.

Toph slammed sand into a solid dome over them, gritting her teeth as something pounded on the sandstone shell. Not fast, but *hard*; like standing in the raging torrent when the skies tore open that others called a killing storm.

The world went gray.

Boots was shivering against her, a quiet rattle like feathers snapping over each other. Toph felt those shivers tremble the sand under them; a faint shimmer, against the pounding gray of water fuzzing every vibration of the earth. Like the desert, but worse. This wasn't just the way sand shifted instead of carrying a steady feel. Something was making the world blind, water pounding in a headache like iron spikes, seeping up through her toes in chilling static that made Boots squeak like leather rubbed wrong-

Oh no you don't!

Toph reached for earth, and scooped their whole shell inland. Stomping sludgy sand, driving that icy water down and away-

It surged back, a wave of freezing empty that sucked down her toes. Sucked down the world.

Can't see can't - focus, Toph!

Reach, and yank, and *reach*-

Air slashed through gray and sandstone; in the dust on her hands, she felt Sokka scrabble through the hole. "Toph, come on!"

Strong hands wrapped to catch a razor-sharp boomerang yanked her out, slinging her over his shoulder with Water Tribe swears. She shivered in the black, biting her lip not to yell that she needed earth, she needed to see, where were her *toes*-

There was yelling. A lot of yelling. Aang from one way behind them. Katara and Tao from another. And a roaring, like waves and storm and something even bigger than a badger-mole.

"Put me down." Toph tried to yell; winced when it came out more of a whimper. She was the greatest earthbender in the world; she was *not* a whiny girl, ever! "Put me down! We gotta help them-"

"Tao told me to get you up here," Sokka said, just as rock-stubborn. "I'm getting you up here- ow!"

Sissy. She hadn't bit him *that* hard.

The rocks up here were hard and dry. At least that was what her hands said as she landed. Her feet gave her just thumps of gray. "I can't see!"

"Yeah, I bet." Sokka didn't sound mad at all. Just worried.

Which made her gut try to tie itself into knots. Toph knew just how mad she'd be if Sokka bit *her*. This was bad.

"We need to - darn it, you don't have time for that." Dropping to the rocks by her, Sokka picked up the lumps on the end of her legs and tucked them under his tunic. "Brrr!"

It burned. Like walking out in winter snow. Toph swallowed the pain and listed to the rumble and roar of water, earth, and air. "What are they fighting?"

"...You don't want to know."

"Sokka!"

"Toph? Right now, I wish *I* was blind."

Familiar trilling as Momo landed nearby. Which meant he thought it was too scary to go up in the air. "What's out there?"

"It's big," Sokka said at last, as thundering splashes went on. "Big as a Fire Navy ship. This huge mass of red arms in the water, with suckers and *teeth*..." He shuddered. "Don't think I'll ever look at pentapuses the same again."

Toph swallowed. "That big."

"Way big. And way sneaky," Sokka said grimly. "If Katara hadn't seen it wave an arm out of the water..." He bent, and blew on her toes. "You feel that?"

"Yeah," Toph gritted out. *Ow*.

"Good." Cloth rustled, as Sokka wrapped his tunic around her feet. "Stay put, okay? I'm going to get a fire going."

Toph bit her lip. "I miss Uncle," she whispered.

Maybe not quiet enough; she felt Sokka's pause in the earth under her hand. "Right now?" Sokka admitted. "I miss him too."

Toph tracked the fight as well as she could, from hisses and sliding splashes and the trembling of the shore as waves smashed it. Which wasn't good at all - but she thought she'd feel something coming fast enough to shield Sokka. Maybe.

Boots was a mist-touch of leather and feathers against her arm, pressing close whenever one of the massive waves struck. "Thanks, little guy," she murmured.

Slipper-soft stomp. Nudging, like wisps of koala-wool over her arm.

"Yeah." Toph swallowed bitterness. "I guess that was stupid."

"Kind of, yeah," Sokka said impatiently, striking spark rocks. "What were you thinking? Nobody goes near shore alone. What, you want a tiger-seal to eat you... Toph?"

Toph scrunched her fingers in sand. She was *not* going to cry. No matter how much her feet hurt. "What's a tiger-seal?"

Flames crackled as tinder caught; she felt wisps of warmth as Sokka stacked the fire with fuel. "Right. You lived in the hills." He helped her shift closed to the fire, partly unwrapping cloth so his tunic funneled warm air over her feet. "They swim, they eat fish, they only come out of the water when they want to warm up or show off to their girls, and they're about as big as an ostrich-horse. Most of the time, they leave people alone."

Toph felt queasy. "And when they don't?"

"They've got teeth like a leopard-shark, and a temper like Zuko's," Sokka said bluntly. "Get between them and the ocean? About all that's left of you is a bloody mess in the snow."

"Oh." The noise had died down, though she still heard Aang yelling at something. "Okay. Scared of water now."

"That's not what I - argh." Sokka grumbled something rude under his breath. "Toph. You're blind. Most of the time, that works out okay. Sometimes? Not that great." He sighed. "Just let us help, okay? We're Water Tribe. We kind of know things about water."

Splash. And spreading silence.

Footsteps, getting more solid as her feet warmed. And then Katara was there in a sliding skid, moving cool water over heels and toes in a swoosh that eased away the pain. "Thanks," Toph sighed.

"What did it do?" Katara pounced. "It almost feels like frostbite, but - not exactly. And it's kind of... mucky."

"Chi drain." Tao's staff tapped the ground. "Kamuiy know human weapons can't harm them. They move quickly to thwart that which can." He sighed; tired, but still gentle. "Now do you see why you *must* learn to sense the spirits, Avatar Aang? Those spirits and spirit-creatures who wish your aid will try to attract your attention, if they can. Those that seek to do harm *will* conceal themselves. I knew the *fēnglàngshāo* haunted this bay, and still I could not sense it until it was nearly too late."

"I understand," Aang said, resigned. Jittered on his toes. "But Toph didn't do anything!"

"Hey!" Toph stomped a still-chilly heel, almost knocking Twinkletoes off his feet before he jumped. "I was getting myself out of there, if you didn't *see* it."

"No! That's not what I mean!" Aang protested. "I mean, you didn't do anything to that spirit!" He hesitated. "Did you?"

"Hello?" Toph sputtered. "I was just *there!*" Playing with the water, yeah - but she hadn't *done* anything.

"Have more faith in your friends," Tao advised. "It is not unusual for a human to offend the spirits without ever intending harm. Unfortunately." Curiosity crept into his voice. "You said you meant to train. Why train there?"

Toph sucked in a breath to explain - or complain, it wouldn't have *mattered* where she trained if he'd just *said* there was a nasty tentacle-thing lurking in the water - and got a mouthful of smoke instead. She wrinkled her nose, trying not to sneeze. *Gah. Tastes like ashes.*

"Sand makes her feet see fuzzy," Katara stepped in. "She's been trying to fix that... Toph?"

Ashes. Toph licked her lips, and sniffed the air. *Dirt's kind of like ashes, sometimes.* And she knew where the smoke was, she could feel it warm against her skin as she reached over the fire.

Air is delicate.

Hand in the smoke, she slowly curled her fingers. Like a wasp-snail, gingerly unfurling its wings from their shell.

Barely breathing, she pulled the eddy of smoke to her.

"Whoa." Sokka's voice was all grinning teeth.

"Guanyin's mercy, no!"

Toph's reflexes had been honed in dozens of Rumbles. She countered the sudden stony trap rumbling around her with slaps that crumbled spikes into dust. "Hey! What gives?"

"And you call yourself the Avatar's teacher?" Tao said sternly. "How dare you- young lady!"

That, to an all too familiar crackle of ice now trapping him in place. Toph grinned at Katara.

"Don't you *young lady* me," Katara said angrily. "What'd you do that for? She's still hurt!"

"She bent smoke," Aang said, stunned. "Toph, you... how... *why?*"

"Ignorance, I do hope," Tao said grimly. "Or else she does not care that her teachers told her it is forbidden."

"Forbidden?" The swing of Sokka's shoulders spoke of a skeptical guy reassuring himself just where Boomerang was. "That was totally cool!"

"It is totally lethal," Tao said sternly. "To Toph." He twisted against ice. "If you would be so kind?"

Reluctantly, Katara beckoned her ice into water and away. "What do you mean, it could hurt Toph? It was just *smoke*."

"It was trespassing," Aang said solemnly. "He's right, Toph. You can't do that again."

Make me, Twinkletoes. "Why not?" Toph shot back. "I'm a bender. I *bend*."

"But you were born an earthbender, and it is earth which claims your power," Taos stated. "To attempt to vest it elsewhere is arrogant, and an insult. Both to the spirit whose element grants your power, and the one in whose realm you have trespassed. The spirits take revenge for such insults. Usually, that is fatal." He shook his head. "Warrior Sui, one of Avatar Kyoshi's closest friends in her training, was a renowned earthbender. But he tampered with water to save her life, when she had not yet completed her training to face Chin the Conqueror. And no healer could save him. He simply wasted away." Tao sighed. "Some disliked how Avatar Kyoshi enforced the separation of our nations, but she did it out of mercy. So no bender should ever be tempted to violate the spirits' wishes." Staff leaning against his shoulder, he spread an empty hand. "The Avatar, and only the Avatar, is granted the right to call on all the spirits' elements. The rest of us... we are only human, Toph."

"But Aang and I worked together to bend clouds," Katara protested. "And Toph and I bent the drill-sludge. Nothing happened to us."

"Then you've been fortunate beyond belief," Tao stated. "Toph, please, think of your friends. Bending water, you may have escaped harm; it's near kin to earth, as fire is. But to bend your opposite--"

"I wasn't bending air!" Toph burst out. "I was bending the smoke! The *ashes*, you dummy!"

Tao drew in a sharp breath. "The... ashes."

"Really really *tiny* ashes!" Toph shot back at him. "Like really really tiny bits of earth *in metal*. And I *can* bend it, because I am *the greatest earthbender in the world!*"

In the quiet after the echoes, she could feel Appa's heartbeat.

"She really is," Katara said; with a shift of her weight that spoke of her gaze *not quite* challenging Tao. "She took on most of the Earth King's guards when we raided his palace."

"Shook the whole place out of whack," Sokka added. "You should have seen the looks on those guys' faces. One minute they're all ranked on the steps; the next, they're headed downhill to the moat. The hard way."

"Bending earth in smoke," Tao mused. Sighed, and rubbed tired eyes. "Be careful, Toph. If you're right, Oma and Shu will watch over you, and all will be well. If not..."

"She'll be fine," Katara insisted. "Right, Aang?" She paused. "Aang?"

"...I don't know."

"But you're--" Katara tensed, swallowing words. "Right. You said at the North Pole, no one taught you about being the Avatar. But Tao's a shaman." She shifted her head that way. "Don't you know?"

"Even if I knew how the Avatar was to be properly trained, which I do not, such training might be less than accurate now," Tao stated. "The world is out of balance. The spirits are angry. Old agreements may not hold, and old alliances may be broken. All I can do is teach the Avatar what I know of the spirits, and pray."

"No," Sokka said bluntly. "That's not all you can do. You can teach the rest of us, too."

Tao's feet had the gripping toes of a frown. "Sokka, you are a gifted fighter, but you are not--"

"Where we came from, the whole village held ceremonies for the spirits," Sokka interrupted. "And Katara was the only bender left. Why can't you teach us?"

"It's not tradition."

Sokka flung up his arms. "What's tradition got to do with saving the world?"

Ooo, not good. Toph winced, feeling Tao's heart rate pick up in stirrings of anger. "Uh, Sokka? Tradition's kind of... well, everything. Almost."

Katara growled under her breath. "The Fire Nation doesn't care about people's traditions-"

Appa sniffed the air, and surged to his feet with a rumble.

Aang was at his head in a bound. "What's wrong, buddy?"

"I guess he knows coal smoke when he smells it." Sokka's hand was raised to shade his eyes, as he peered out over the emptiness of water. "Fire Nation, heading this way!"

Oh boy, Toph thought. Time to make a hole and pull it in after them.

"What? No!" Katara's hand fell to her waterskin. "They couldn't have gotten past Dad-" Her voice cut off, anger fading into a laugh. "I don't believe it!"

"Um, guys, hiding?" Toph pointed out.

"No, it's okay!" Sokka was doing a mad little dance. "It's Dad!"

"Chief Hakoda seized a Fire Nation ship," Tao murmured, also making no move to hide. "Amazing man."

Yeah, he is, Toph thought soberly. But not as amazing as the airbender bouncing happily around her.

She was glad Chief Hakoda was back. He was a great guy. In a *Fire Nation ship*.

Clue, Aang. How do you think he got it?

Chapter End Notes

If anyone's interested in poking into history in general, particularly with an archaeological viewpoint added, I recommend any book by Brian Fagan. Fish on Friday is of particular interest to those curious about the effects of holidays on culture and history.

The history with Sui came from a reviewer suggestion on just what would have happened if Kyoshi met someone who became a yāorén, and died of it. Thanks! Yes, Tao is wrong about what happens when you bend a foreign element, and why. The knowledge of the yāorén has been lost a long time.

On Blue and Orange Morality in reference to dragons: Very cool entry, people. Very cool. I liked this a lot more than I anticipated from the first version that went up. Yes,

exactly; Zuko's instincts are a mess, and the poor guy knows it.

In Shidan's case, there are two main reasons he didn't help, despite actually liking some Air Nomads. First, because he and Kuzon were Up To Something that kept them very busy. Remember that in canon Sozin's actions caught almost the whole world off guard, and the bulk of the massacre was carried out in one day, much of it thousands of miles from dragon territory. The vast majority of dragons couldn't have helped whether or not they'd wanted to. Second - Kuzon, Ran, and a host of other people were dying. Byakko goes, Shiroto goes up. Shidan had priorities.

Also, do more research on Kent State than Wikipedia has up. And on the Sixties in general, and the so-called anti-war movement in particular. A lot of those people were not pacifists. You're not a pacifist if you throw rocks at firemen and police; you're an idiot, depending on someone else to act in a much more civilized manner than you are. Also note that groups like the Weather Underground and others claiming to be part of the anti-war movement were busily wreaking havoc, inflicting property damage, and murdering people across the country. And there were all kinds of rumors and noises about people like that being in the crowd. Potentially with bombs.

But let's go back to dragon behavior, and why Blood Knights and Proud Warrior Race are, indeed, a fair description of what's going on.

Read up on the behavior of any intelligent, social predator. Look up wolves and chimpanzees. Not the Disney version; the real stuff, particularly later works by Jane Goodall and anything on the Druid Wolf Pack in Yellowstone. Social predators may not be interested in slaughtering random bystanders, but they are inherently violent. If one aggressive group meets another and senses weakness, blood will out. Warning, what Goodall found out about cannibalism in chimpanzees is not for the faint of heart.

(If you really want Nightmare Fuel, look up what groups of dolphins have been found doing to smaller porpoises. Anyone familiar with Zoe's quote about the Reavers in Firefly? Dolphins don't make clothes. Outside of that...)

Shidan said that among dragons, pacifistic behavior is insane. And he knows humans don't think so. Air Nomads were not dragons. They were not in dragon territory. Hence, they didn't "need" killing. Dragons tried to judge them by human standards. As far as they understood them, at least.

Dragons and firebenders know they run a fine enough line in sanity that they've formalized the Agni Kai. They know they're aggressive and they have to set limits on it. What do you think all that excessive formality of customs in the Fire Nation is for? Formal customs, as opposed to the improvisational types of social interaction we tend to have in the West, can let you slow down and think. They give you time to cool down.

That said - have I ever said Azula and Ozai are not sociopaths?

We have wolves, *Canis lupus*, and dogs, *Canis lupus familiaris*. Still closely related, after several thousand years of natural and human selection. Still with similar instinctive behaviors - but a dog has key differences from a wolf that allow them to negotiate living with us on a usually safe basis, despite the fact that dogs are descended from apex predators. Short definition: apex predators (like wolves, killer whales, and humans) hunt - and almost nothing hunts them.

Crossing wolves and dogs is a *bad idea*.

With a hybrid, you can't predict what it will look like - more importantly, you can't predict what it will behave like. They may be tamable. They may be wild. They may be totally fearless and aggressive toward humans, far beyond normal wolves; wolf-dogs may be behind some werewolf legends of people getting gruesomely eaten.

Now consider that with dragons (who are, hands down, apex predators), firebenders, and anyone not in the Fire Nation.

Dragons aren't good neighbors for humans? Oh, so true. I may think the Fire Nation got a bum rap in the show and Iroh is one of the best uncles in fiction, flat out. But I would never, ever claim they're safe. They're not tame.

Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

For anyone who doesn't have the Avatar world map handy... The *Suzuran* is currently north of Gaipan (remember, where Jet hangs out), heading up the river toward the coast. Aang and co. still aren't very far from Chameleon Bay. Azula and Ty Lee are heading west from Ba Sing Se, overland. None of these groups is currently near each other. Fortunately. Remember, a major part of Zuko's strategy is getting the heck away from Aang and Azula.

Of course, no plan survives contact with the enemy. Zuko doesn't have to taunt Murphy. Murphy comes looking, expecting a party...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

After years as a leader of firebenders, Iroh had made a habit of not leaving flammable objects in plain view in his quarters. It served him well when dealing with a hot-blooded nephew. And also, it seemed, with dragons.

Smoke still rising from his robes, Shidan gave him a wintry smile. "Feeling better?"

Snuffing out one more spark caught in his sleeves, and waving a hand to shoo some of the smoke from their *discussion* out the window, Iroh gave him a look of devilish innocence.

"You are his uncle. I suspect he'll forgive you usurping his territory," Shidan mused. "But I also suspect he has no true grasp on why he is so angry. Ursa..." The dragon grimaced, and shook his head. "Your brother has much to answer for. And in my arrogance, so do I."

Arrogance, Iroh thought. Well, that was part of fire; entwined within the drive to live, to burn, to make the world bend to one's wishes. Should he be surprised dragons fell prey to it as well? "What has happened to Ursa?"

Shidan let out a rumbling sigh. "She is wounded."

"So you have said," Iroh observed dryly. "I must wonder, what wound can linger so long, and defeat even a fire-healer?"

"Not one of the flesh." Shidan looked into memory. "Prince Iroh. *General* Iroh. Dragon of the West, and heir to the throne. You were trained to conquer the world." Pale gold stabbed at him. "Did you know what Azulon trained your brother for? We thought we did. And found, too late, that we were wrong."

Iroh frowned. "Ozai was taught to take up my duties if I should fall. And to deal with factions of the court."

"Deal with, indeed," Shidan said grimly. "You were trained in the inner fire to lead, and to rule. Ozai was meant to be your right hand. Your shadow. Your master of onmitsu. And to that purpose, Azulon trained him to *manipulate*."

The snarl in that word knotted Iroh's gut. "My nephew is right. Enough evasions."

Shidan's shoulders slumped. "Zuko wishes to see his mother. I know it. I can feel it. But I cannot let that happen. It would crush him." Pale gold dimmed. "I will not see him broken by what she would do."

Chill sluiced down Iroh's spine. "Speak plainly!"

Shidan's fists clenched. "My daughter... believes her children are very much alike."

Iroh leaned a hand on the table to steady himself, feeling the roughness where Zuko's wild emotions had almost scorched wood. "How?" he managed.

"She loved her children. And she feared them," Shidan said starkly. "She knew, as Zuko knows, what risk she ran. Two dragon-children, bearing children, with no human blood to bank the fire? The risk of a dark dragon is small, but it is there. And that was before we realized what your brother was."

If he closed his eyes, Iroh could almost believe himself in quicksand. The same sense of struggle, of numbing panic. And there was not even an earthbender to blame it on. "Surely, she could not believe her own son-"

Shidan eyed him. "I dared not near the royal palace, or recruit watchers too close. Yet even I have heard rumors of Princess Azula."

"They are nothing alike," Iroh said firmly.

"They are brother and sister," Shidan observed. "Would you claim to be nothing like Ozai? I thought not." He regarded Iroh. "You are kin of the Fire Lord's line. It stamps you, blood and bone. Your niece and nephew, my Ursa's children, are born of that same deadly blood. Power. Cunning. Ruthlessness. Do you think Makoto would deign to mate with any creature not her full match in them all? Byakko's clans hold Shirotora in their keeping, and the White Tiger has long been a friend to man. Makoto is of lost Asagitatsu, and the Blue Dragon ever hungers for the lives of fools."

He wanted to deny it. Zuko and Azula were night and day, fire and water; his nephew had nothing in common with the will to murder Sozin had unleashed on the world. And yet... Tutors challenged. Rules defied. And that one instant in the war council when all had been lost.

Even as a small child, Zuko had *hated* idiots.

Still. "Surely, she knew her own son," Iroh objected.

"Not with Ozai's interference." Shidan looked grim. "She is my daughter, Iroh. She is - we are - ill equipped to deal with lies. And she did love her husband. Part of her still does." Wood made a rasping sound under clawed nails. "And when one you care for and bear loyalty to tells you your daughter is wonderful and honorable and a prodigy, while the best that can be said of your son is that he lacks ambition and is, perhaps, not quite bright..."

Iroh's heart sank. "It is not true."

"No. But it was true enough, with all about her willing to follow Ozai's lead," Shidan replied. "Even you."

That hurt. But Iroh's eyes narrowed. "There is more."

"So there is," Shidan admitted. "Imagine her flight, General. Imagine you have just killed the Fire

Lord - the Fire Lord! - and must leave your young in Ozai's hands. Would you wish to believe you had left a child? Or merely another monster?"

It chilled, like an icicle to the heart. "Surely you have told her this is not so!"

"What could I tell her?" Anger; but from that anguished *crunch* as claws bit through wood, it was aimed at himself. "All the reports I had of Zuko were her letters and what Kotone's spies could gather. Before his exile, there was little they could tell me, save that he had not yet earned Ozai's displeasure. Damning enough, in her eyes. And after..."

Ah, yes. Iroh sighed. There had been some very public losses of temper on Zuko's part. More than enough for rumor to spread that the exiled prince was a spoiled, self-serving fool.

"That he even accepted the quest, she has taken as proof of his father's blood," Shidan said quietly. "I have tried to remind her it is no more than we of Byakko have sought to do. If far less subtle. I have not succeeded."

"Ursa was always kind. Forgiving," Iroh said heavily. "This will break his heart."

"And so my silence." Steam wafted from Shidan's sigh. "I do not think it is wholly her decision, this fear. She struck against the Fire Lord. That shattered the protections the Fire Sages gifted her as the wife of Azulon's son. When I did finally find her, after her escape, the spirits' torment had driven her to... injury."

Hairs rose on the back of Iroh's neck. "Legends of dragon-children claim they are immune to lesser spirits."

"Resistant," Shidan stated. "Not immune. Even lesser *kamui*, backed by the Face-Stealer's will, are not brushed lightly aside." He frowned. "Most of those who seek to harm her are spirits who draw strength from the Fire Lord's war. Kotone and I have taken steps to protect against them, so much as we can. Ursa herself acts in her own defense; any tie to the line of Sozin is a link her hunters can use against her. To cut herself off from her cubs, to refuse to believe they are anything but Ozai's - it does protect her."

Iroh raked him with a look, and raised an irritated brow. "You speak so calmly of your daughter abandoning her son?"

Pale gold slashed at him, bright with rage. Iroh felt the very air grow thick, wavering with heat.

...Then it died, and Shidan drew in a steadying breath. "I am *not human*, General. Do us both the courtesy of recalling that. If a hatchling is lost, it is *lost*. You do not allow dark dragons to live. Not even your own cubs. Their mother knows them better than anyone!" His breath caught. "Or she should."

Iroh leaned back from singed wood. "You never believed Zuko was lost."

"I had Ursa's letters," Shidan nodded slowly. "Ozai may have warped what she thought of which child was the liar, yet there was one fact she wrote, time and again. Azula thought her uncle and cousin both weak-willed fools. While Zuko loved you." He smiled. "Over the decades, on my travels for Kotone, I watched you on campaign. I saw a good man. A hard man, to be sure, and one who often did not question his father's will. But a good man. One who might have considered the Fire Nation's conquests enough, and ended the war."

"It would have been possible, then," Iroh allowed. Considering what he had deliberately shut away these six years; if he had taken the Dragon Throne... "With our losses in the Siege of the North -

no."

"Precisely."

Iroh straightened. Recalling the Oasis, and the Moon, and legends of Koh. "I believe you should explain."

"Among you, in this form, I look old," Shidan obliged. "Among dragons... suffice it to say that like my grandson, I too lost much of my clan when I was young, to Makoto and those she considered allies. Dragons were dying before Sozin ever began his hunt. And with those deaths, we lost much. But my clan gifted me with these shards of truth: the Face-Stealer was wronged in the past. And in the face of that wrong, he wishes to destroy all those he holds accountable."

"The Fire Nation," Iroh nodded, grim.

"Humans," Shidan corrected. "Every nation is human, General. And so we must all suffer." He chuckled bitterly. "Even dragons are human to him, for we share your blood, and call you kin. To the Face-Stealer, we are no better. Worse; for we were born of Agni's fire, and yet we step into your world of our own will. We are his prey, set to destroy one another, to ease that inhuman hate."

A sobering thought. "If you knew this, why not tell the Avatar?" Iroh challenged. "It is his duty to soothe the great spirits."

"According to my clan, the last Avatar told was Kuruk." Shidan shook his head. "That did not end well." He shrugged. "By the time I was gifted with that history, Roku was already refusing to speak to Sozin. We tried to bring him the news through Fang, but he wished nothing to do with a grief not of his making. Those responsible were dead and dust, he claimed, and if the Face-Stealer wished recompense, he had only to ask." Shidan snorted. "I do wonder why the Fire Sages never admitted it was odd that a *Fire Nation* Avatar could be surprised by a *volcano*."

"They suffer, serving the Fire Lord instead of Agni," Iroh stated. "Zuko tells me Sage Shiyu acted on Aang's behalf. We should-"

"If you mean to tell Avatar Aang our world is tearing itself apart because of one great spirit," Shidan cut across his words, "remember whom you are dealing with. And *think*. He is a *twelve-year-old boy*."

Who is the Avatar, and duty-bound to be responsible for the world, Iroh almost said. But paused, at the grim look on Shidan's face. That was the look of one who had seen a scorpion-viper twitch, and was wondering if it would pass safely by... or if he must act.

Which was uncalled for. The White Lotus was prepared to handle Avatars lost to evil, yes - but Aang was far from evil. He was only-

Young.

It was hard to think of the boy, and not the inhuman power within him. Yet Iroh had seen himself that when the Avatar Spirit was not striking out, Aang was well-meaning, if impulsive, and prone to sudden kindness...

And he pictured that kind, young boy, facing the Face-Stealer with the best of intentions, to set right that ancient spirit's wrong.

...I do not think I will be sleeping well tonight.

"Perhaps he should not be told, yet," Iroh allowed. "But we might write down what you know, and send it to Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe-"

"Chief Hakoda's son? Interesting choice," Shidan mused. And caught Iroh's look. "Kotone's devoted *spy*, General. Little use would I be did I not know who commanded the Water Tribe fleet."

Ah. And Iroh might never admit it to the dragon, but that was slightly daunting. The White Lotus was accustomed to holding the edge when it came to information, or none of them would have survived in occupied territory. How much those of Byakko knew - that, he suspected he had underestimated. Badly. "Sokka is a warrior, by his tribe's ways; inventive enough to have kept Aang alive through his journey, and sensible enough to accept even Fire Nation aid when it is needed." He chuckled wryly. "Zuko trusts him as well. To a point."

"To a point?" Shidan frowned. "The boy has conflicting loyalties, then. Is the rift within his tribe, or his family?"

Iroh blinked, for once caught off guard. "In his family, possibly. Sokka and Chief Hakoda were willing to hold truce with us, but Katara... how did you know?"

"Trust is more precious than the finest sword, and cuts more deeply," Shidan said gravely. "Dragon-children hoard it, until they know what binds a man. *To a point...*" The dragon shook himself, disturbed. "You will see that there is someone to stand between them, should Zuko encounter her again?"

Unsettling, and suspicious. "Why?" Iroh demanded.

Shidan paused. Frowned, obviously trying to frame something *felt* in human words. "It is far more comfortable to have an honest enemy, than one who might be an untrustworthy ally."

Iroh straightened, the implication striking home. "He would not kill her!"

"You know him better than I," Shidan acknowledged. "But if I were young, and frustrated, and convinced she stood between me and one who might be an ally or honorable enemy - I would be tempted. Very tempted."

Iroh eyed him. "Perhaps it is not Ursa who believes her children are too alike."

Shidan met him gaze for gaze. Sighed, and gripped the bridge of his nose in a familiar gesture of *everyone around me is insane*.

Which, Iroh admitted to himself, he'd often enjoyed provoking out of his nephew. The young man was far too focused, at times. If a man did not take the time to laugh at himself, how would he ever realize when old goals were no longer practical, or even possible?

"I did not say he would harm her," Shidan said precisely, letting go. "I said he would *want* to. If I loosed my blade against all who made me want to paint the walls with their blood, Kotone would have what was left of several noble clans trying to besiege her. Which would be *inconvenient*." A puff of steam. "So I restrain myself. As I am sure Zuko does. As I know, Azula does not." He cocked his head, whiskers twitching. "Have you truly never wished to char an annoyance into ashes?"

Agni help them, the dragon actually sounded *curious*. Iroh had to shake his head. "Not a child. Certainly not a young girl who is a friend to one Zuko does trust. Toph would be quite upset, should Katara be harmed."

"Toph?" Shidan looked intrigued.

"Lady Toph Bei Fong," Iroh obliged. "A young earthbender, better known to some as the Blind Bandit..."

That grin, Iroh reflected, was *far* too sharp to be human.

"The Rumble champion," Shidan mused. "The Avatar's earthbending teacher, I take it? Young; how very odd. Roku, Kyoshi, Kuruk from what I was told of him - they all took older teachers. Established benders."

"Perhaps not so odd," Iroh stated, on firmer ground. "Monk Gyatso, from what I have read of him, was very young at heart."

"Hmm." Shidan rested his chin on a clawed fist, thoughtful.

"And perhaps Gyatso, and Aang, have deeper wisdom than you or my nephew believe," Iroh said. "Toph has made alliances with those of the Fire Nation who wish to aid her. Katara is willing to listen to her brother, and Sokka would have no quarrel with us if the war was stopped. And Gyatso - you would know more than I, how he taught Aang to shun bloodshed." He spread empty hands. "The Fire Nation may not trust the Avatar. But this one, truly, means no harm. So long as the balance is restored."

Shidan regarded him for a long moment. Sighed. "It must be comforting to have such faith in the spirits."

Iroh started, caught flat-footed. "You are a child of Agni!"

"Of mortal flesh and bone, just as you," Shidan said tartly. "Byakko follows Agni's will, yes. But to do what is right, is only to do what is right. It does not guarantee success, or even survival. I hope that you are right. I pray that you are right. But I will *act* to defend my clan and kin. I have seen half of Byakko perish once before. Do not ask me to place my clan's lives in the hands of the one who killed them!"

Iroh's eyes narrowed.

Pale gold glared back, then reluctantly looked away. "I know. It was Sozin's orders that killed them. But if Aang had stayed instead of fleeing! If he had trusted his friends, and fled to them, instead of the South Pole where he knew no one-!"

"Then Sozin might have succeeded," Iroh said levelly. "The past is gone, Shidan of Byakko. Let it die."

"Look my grandson in the eye," Shidan said, not quite steady, "and tell me you believe the past is dead."

Iroh drew in a hiss of breath. Revenge for Kuzon, Shidan had named Zuko. But for the harm done Ursa, and Zuko himself... "What do you intend toward my brother?"

"Defiance," Shidan said grimly. "To our last breaths, if we must." A snort. "Oh, do not mistake me. I want him broken and bleeding at my feet. I want him *dead*, and the ashes scattered." A low, snarling sigh. "But what I *want*, will not save my children. I know his skill as well as you. If my death would assure his, I would raid the capital myself. But I do not have the power." A bleak chuckle. "He is Fire Lord, by the Avatar's decree, with all the will of the world behind him. I... am only a dragon."

Iroh kept his expression politely neutral. Accepting. Not even a hint of a smirk of disbelief. If there was one thing decades at war had taught him, it was that if one's opponent wished to be underestimated, sometimes it was best to play along.

And if Shidan believed blood told in Ozai's children, then Iroh could look to dragon-children to judge the dragons. Three years on a small ship with his nephew had taught him much. Among other things, that a quiet, calm, desperate Zuko was one a breath away from carrying out the impossible. Such as... oh, breaking into Lake Laogai.

I must warn Captain Jee. Such adventures can be hazardous. To everyone.

"A very curious dragon, I will admit," Shidan went on, humor glinting in pale gold. "I had no idea I would find other kin aboard. Who is the little firebender? And who is Jet, to threaten him?"

He sensed Jinhai. So a dragon was not *quite* as meek a power as Shidan wished to imply. This should be interesting. "Jet, and those like him, are part of why Zuko seeks to build a sanctuary," Iroh began. "We met the young Freedom Fighter on the ferry to Ba Sing Se..."

Min touched her arm as they headed down the foreboding steel passageway toward Amaya and an older marine, giving her his best Big Brother look. "You don't have to do this."

"Yes I do," Suyin said stubbornly, getting the words out before her shaky knees could betray her. It wasn't cold down here in *Suzuran's* brig. But it felt - scary.

He can't hurt us. He can't hurt Jinhai. He's on the other side of steel bars. Thick ones.

All true. And none of it made her feel any better.

She risked a glance at Mai's impassive face, as the noblewoman walked behind them both, ready to nod at any guards who might question them. "I have to see him," Suyin insisted. "I have to know why anybody would do... what Jet tried to do." Turn Lee - Zuko and Uncle Iroh - in to the Dai Li as firebenders? That was *horrible*.

...So they really were firebenders. It was still awful. Jet had lived in Ba Sing Se, just like everyone. Didn't he see what the Dai Li did to people?

Well, most of them. Amaya said they'd gotten a good, hard shake when the Earth King had to hide, and they'd be thinking a lot more about what they *really* wanted to do for the city. Like Uncle Shirong had. And he'd done some horrible things, he said so himself, but Mom and Dad said he wasn't going to do them anymore.

Not that she thought it could have been as bad as *he* thought it was. Uncle Shirong was Dai Li, but he'd *helped* the city. He'd just been stuck, like Dad had been. He knew what the Dai Li were doing wasn't right, he just... couldn't fix it. And when he *could* fix some of it, when Zuko and her family needed help - he'd *been* there. That mattered.

And now Uncle Shirong was family, and he was going to stay one of the good guys. If she and Jia and Mom had to sit on him to keep him that way.

"He hates the Fire Nation, and he wants us dead," Mai said calmly. As if it didn't shake her to the soul. "It's pretty common." A jet-black brow lifted. "This one seems a little more fanatical than most." She nodded slightly. "Healer Amaya. Corporal Moriaki."

We're here. Suyin gulped, looking at the steel-barred doors of the brig cells. *Oh boy.*

"Loyal to the Earth Kingdom," Mai went on, "or just crazy?"

"I can hear you!"

"Yes, we're all quite aware of that by now, young man," Moriaki said dryly. Like Captain Jee, his hair had gone all gray, kept short except for one small topknot.

The armor's still scary, Suyin thought. But his wrinkles... they were like her father's. A face that worried, not one that hurt people. And he carried a bag that looked... well, a lot like Amaya's looked, when she thought she might have to handle something that didn't really need bending to fix. Or needed more than bending. A lot more.

"Would you care to answer Lady Mai's question?" Moriaki went on. "Or should we ask your companions?"

Messy brown hair lunged at the bars. "Don't you dare come near them, you-!"

Amaya's upraised hand halted the spit in midair. Suyin stared, wide-eyed, as the waterbender considered it, and Jet, and a pale-faced Smellerbee and Longshot-

A knife-sharp motion, and saliva *cracked* against the rear of the cell, hard enough to slash paint off steel.

"Normally I prefer patience, and reason," Amaya said, with a sadness that shivered to Suyin's toes. "But Lee has tried them both. He risked his own life to be certain you escaped Ba Sing Se. And here you are, again, attacking one of my tribe. The next one - and there will be only *one* next one - will draw blood. After that..."

Longshot gripped Jet's shoulder. Brown eyes seemed to clear a little. "Just stay away from us," Jet growled. "You work with the Dai Li, now you work with Fire Nation - what kind of waterbender are you?"

"You worked with the Dai Li?" Suyin blurted out. And wanted to clap her hand over her mouth. Amaya had worked with Uncle Shirong, she *knew* that. But - the way Jet said it, it sounded...

"Oh yeah," Jet breathed, looking her way with a smile that was just *wrong*. "She's a happy old torturer. You didn't know?"

"Big words, from the moron who got himself caught," Min snarled right back. "Amaya says you're messed up about your family. Well, tough! You know what you almost did to *my* family? You almost got us all killed! I don't care if she cut your fingers off and made you eat them! Lee kept chasing you off, and I *couldn't*, and you just wouldn't leave it alone-!"

"Stop it!" Suyin burst out, grabbing his arm. "You're not like this!" She glared at Jet, and the boy and girl with him who weren't *doing* anything. "It's true. We were so scared. I don't know what Amaya did, and I don't know what you did. But I know what you wanted to do! You hate firebenders who didn't do anything to you!" She dragged in breath, trying not to cry. "Just tell me *why*."

"You're a firebender?" Jet backed off from the bars. "*You're* a firebender."

"She's not," Min started.

Suyin gripped her brother's arm again. "So what do you care? I was *born* in Ba Sing Se! Dad's a *teacher*! We would have followed the Earth King all our lives!"

Jet's lip curled. "No, you wouldn't." He shrugged at the steel around them. "You're here. With the Fire Nation. So you can save your worthless firebending neck." He came one step closer, eyes narrowed and smug. "A true patriot would have died."

Suyin froze.

"You don't believe that!" Smellerbee burst out, crowding next to Jet so he had to look at her. "You can't!"

"I'm afraid he can, young lady," Moriaki said gravely. "I've seen this before. On our own side, unfortunately." The marine sighed softly. "I imagine you had reason for your hate, young man. It's a powerful force, and not always an evil one. When hope dies, when all else seems to fail - hate can keep you alive."

"Don't act like you get me, firebender!"

Moriaki smiled. "Ah. Now there you are mistaken. I am not a firebender, though many of my squad are. I'm only a medic. A combat healer, in your terms. And no, I most certainly do not *get* you. But I have seen those afflicted often enough to understand the forces at work." An armored shrug. "You are comfortable in the embrace of your hate. It warms you, when all the world seems frozen and fragile as new ice. It gives you purpose. And it walls you away from your grief."

"You've got no right to talk about being sorry, you monster!" Jet flung a rude gesture at Suyin. "None of you do!"

Steel gleamed between Mai's fingers. "You're not just boring. You're rude."

Suyin swallowed, heart beating fast. Oh spirits, there was going to be blood, and screaming...

"We do not throw weapons into the brig, Lady Mai," Moriaki said dryly. "It annoys the captain."

"Too bad." Steel vanished again. "Did you two get what you came for?"

"I guess," Min said, a little shaken. "I don't get it, but... I don't think I want to." He looked at Suyin. "Can we go now?"

Shivering, Suyin nodded.

Jet smirked. "That's right, run away-"

Smellerbee jabbed him in the ribs, one quick punch. "Quit it, Jet! It isn't right!" She flung a glare at all of them. "And it's not right for you to keep us here, either! Just let us go!"

"My dear young lady, I assure you the captain will be quite happy to, as soon as we're somewhere the prince is certain your fanatical friend will do no more harm," Moriaki stated. "I believe someone mentioned a nunnery."

Dead silence. Longshot raised an eyebrow. Amaya shot Moriaki a dark look.

"If the boy will throw the word *bastard* about, he should know precisely whom he is insulting," Moriaki said dryly, pulling a scroll from his bag in a hiss of paper. "And why it is likely to get both himself and his companions executed." He smiled wryly. "It might amuse you to know this turned up in the archives we brought aboard. The Dai Li simply never had time to realize it applied."

Smellerbee gingerly took the scroll through the bars, and started to unroll it. Almost dropped it,

eyes wide, mouth gaping. "This - these are-"

Against his will, Jet looked. Snapped his gaze back up. "It's a lie!"

Moriaki raised his own brow, affronted. "I assure you, it's quite genuine."

"It's insane!" Jet snapped. "The Fire Lord would never-"

"Is that not your quarrel with us?" Moriaki's tone could have shaved steel. "That we of the Fire Nation are all insane monsters?"

"You." Jet jabbed an accusing finger toward the marine. "You're trying to play with our heads. It *won't work*."

"Both traitors violated imperial orders to ex-" Smellerbee stumbled on the calligraphy.

Longshot gripped the scroll above her hands, steadying it. "To exterminate the Water Tribe barbarians as well as capture the Avatar." The archer looked up. "Permission is granted to kill them on sight."

Out of the corner of her eye, Suyin saw Min gulp. "Have I mentioned lately how glad I am Dad's not crazy?"

"You should meet mine," Mai said levelly. "He was pleased with me. As long as I didn't move. Or breathe. Or do anything a proper young lady shouldn't." She shrugged. "Azula just wanted to make her father happy. It's sad. As long as you're not in lightning range."

"What's really scary?" Min muttered. "I think I get that."

Me too, Suyin thought, chilled. Your dad was your *dad*. You wanted him to be proud of you. And Zuko had to walk away from that. Even though Fire Lord Ozai was evil - it had to hurt.

"It's a lie," Jet repeated flatly, not looking at the scroll. "Kill on sight? And we're supposed to believe a whole Fire Navy ship turned traitor?"

"I won't bore you with the details. You wouldn't believe them anyway," Moriaki observed. "Suffice it to say that this is... a ship of orphans, in a sense. No other commander would lead us, or let us fight for our people the best way we can." He eyed Jet. "But of course, we wouldn't understand you at all." He straightened. "Have you seen what you needed, Healer Amaya?"

"To a point," the waterbender acknowledged. "It's still possible this could be physical, not... obsession. I need a closer examination." She eyed the youngsters in red and green. "You, out."

Suyin had never been so glad to follow a healer's advice.

Min kept his mouth shut until they were safely headed down to the hold. "You let him think you're the firebender? That's-"

"An old ploy, but still a good one," Mai said thoughtfully. "Every clan should have a *kagemusha*. People going after benders never expect a knife."

Suyin gulped. She didn't *want* to-

But I would. If Jet was coming for Jinhai, for family - I would.

"He'll try to hurt her," Min protested.

"If he gets loose near us? Probably," Mai agreed. "You want him to target Jinhai instead? Suyin stands a fighting chance."

"But Jinhai's just a kid!"

Suyin stepped onto the next deck, and scooted out of the way of a passing sailor carrying a steel plate, a toolkit, and a preoccupied look. Mai and Min caught sight of him just after; Mai pressed them both against the wall as the man grumbled his way past.

Joining Suyin on the deck, Mai gave Min a sober look. "You think it would matter?"

"No," Min sighed, following them through the maze walled with stowed supplies. "Lousy thing to think about people." He glanced at Suyin. "But he'll know she's not a bender."

"There are ways to fake it, if you're bluffing someone who doesn't know fire," Mai informed them. "Flash paper. Flint and oil. There's a paste you can use that keeps you from burning for a few minutes. Ty Lee showed me that one. We'll need Corporal Moriaki's help to make it; it's tricky, and using it too much can make you sick. And you need time to put it on, so it's not useful if you're surprised."

"People pretend to be benders?" As had become a habit, Suyin kept her hand on the wall of cargo netting as they headed for home. It was just so *different* from the city; tough, hempen strands around a woven-steel core, black as nut-husk dye, carrying scents of salt, fish, and tar. "Doesn't that... offend somebody?"

"Not Agni." Mai smiled slightly. "They say he loves a good trick."

Okay. That was good. If kind of creepy. "Do you..." Suyin waited for a few neighbors to pass, not wanting to say anything around those who weren't family. "Do you think we ran away?"

Mai was quiet. So was Min, surprising Suyin. *I guess he really wants to know, too.*

"What Jet calls running, we would call a rout," Mai said at last. "That's not what we did. We made a tactical withdrawal from terrain the enemy holds to their advantage, so we can open a new flank and lead the Fire Lord to divide his forces."

"So we ran, but with a good reason," Min said wryly.

"You'd rather have stayed? Dead people don't serve their lord." Mai frowned at herself. "Ghosts can, but that's rare. Better to be a live problem." She looked Min in the eye. "You're a better citizen of the Earth King than Jet will ever be."

...Oh great. Mushy stuff. "I'll go see if Mom needs help with dinner," Suyin said in a hurry, and forged ahead.

It was even true. Cooking on the ship wasn't like back home, where everyone had a stove. Here, there was a galley with stoves and ovens and really weird things, and the trick was preparing everything to get it set to cook, then nabbing your spot in Cook Luchan's schedule. And making sure you separated all the parings and peelings and stuff the way he wanted, so it could go into the Deadly Soup of the Day, or the worm bins.

Which were both creepy and utterly cool. Making your own dirt to grow tiny trees in, so there were flowers on board? And fish-bait?

Not that she liked putting worms on a hook. But fishing was something you could do, out in the air,

and not be in anybody's way.

Pressed against the netting yet again as some poor lady tried to herd her kids past, Suyin really wanted to be fishing.

Another few turns, and she was back in their own nook, grinning at Lim and Daiyu as they gnawed some of the purple carrots Luli and Meixiang were slicing-

Her brain stuttered to a halt, as she tripped over a sitting kid her own age, with a sword and a wolf-like scowl and one stark lock of white in black hair. "Augh-!"

Strong hands grabbed her, gripping with the kind of calluses she'd first felt on Lee. "Easy. You're okay."

Brown hair, gray-blue eyes, and an odd green armor and uniform that twiggled at her memory. One of Dad's scrolls?

"Sorry," the swordswoman went on, steadying her. "Guess we should get a little farther back from the doorway-"

"You're a Kyoshi Warrior!" Suyin blurted out, finally placing the sword and fan. "How - who - what?"

"Saoluan," the warrior introduced herself. "The scowly silent type is my little sword-brother, Langxue."

Flat on the deck, Langxue scowled. "Hmph."

"He's had a rough day," Saoluan advised, helping Suyin step out of the tangle. "Lieutenant Sadao said we'd be better off with your families than anyone else. You already know about yāorén-"

Picking himself up, Langxue almost growled. "Are you going to go through this every time someone else shows up?"

"You better believe it," Saoluan said cheerfully. "Ba Sing Se people are *weird*. Imagine, living in the middle of a pile of rocks, instead of having a good ocean between you and the bad guys. Only fair to warn them we're going to be weird right back." She winked at Suyin. "Hey, you're going to be heading up to the galley, right? Can you find out if Lord Shidan sent over any river shrimp?"

"Any... what?" Suyin wondered. There was a really *suspicious* grin on her mother's face.

"I promise I'll tell you what's in it," Meixiang said virtuously. "After you try it."

Oh boy.

But she set to work on the carrots anyway, sure of one thing.

We're Earth Kingdom and Fire, on a Fire Nation ship, with a dragon and people from Kyoshi Island on board.

Nobody out there is having a weirder day than I am.

Weirdest. Day. Ever.

He'd been on a Fire Navy ship before, once. Briefly. But he'd never gotten below the deck Katara

had frozen him to, which meant his little taboo-breaking sister had probably seen more of the inside of a Fire Nation ship with Aang than he had. Not that he was planning to admit it. Not now, down here with Dad deep in steel, away from the wind. Maybe not ever.

All the smells are wrong. All the sounds are wrong.

Sokka knew Water Tribe ships, wood and canvas and sticky smells of seaweed-pitch to caulk the seams. And fish. Sometimes a copper-rich scent of blood and seal fat, but always a smell of fish.

This hold smelled like rust and oil and coal smoke, with a hint of bilge tang from Bato still figuring out the pumps. It creaked, but not like wood; metal on metal, like the drill, almost too low to hear. It set his teeth on edge.

Doesn't seem to bother Dad.

But then, looks could be deceiving. Out of the corner of his eye Sokka saw his father surreptitiously tug at the gray collar of his captured uniform. And felt a little better.

Good thing the captain was about Dad's size-

And he didn't want to even *think* that too loud, not even with Aang tucked into a cabin where he and Tao could talk spirits and Katara could try and work on his scars. Aang had a way of not being where you expected him.

We've got a problem. A big one. And I don't know what to do.

"You're quiet," Hakoda observed, searching this section of the hold for anything useful the warriors might have missed in their early hurry to get the mess cleared away before they'd reached the Avatar.

"It's... big," Sokka said, tilting his head back to stare at riveted steel. So *much* steel. You could fit all the knives in the village into one girder, and still have room to stuff a canoe in. *They've got all this and they want more? Why?*

Duh. The Fire Nation was greedy and evil, that was why.

...Only that was the easy answer. Zuko, General Iroh, Captain Jee, even that crazy woman Teruko - they weren't evil. Scary as hell, dangerous, and nobody he'd *ever* let date his sister. But not evil.

They're not like the Fire Army thugs we met at Haru's village, or working for Zhao. They don't want anything.

...Not stuff, anyway.

Reminded him of the guards he'd met at Gaipan, when he tried to warn the village before Jet's flood could crash down on everybody. He was Water Tribe. The enemy. They could see that, of *course* they didn't trust him-

But when the old traveler had vouched for him, the guy in charge had let him go. Just like that.

Get out of here. We'll evacuate the village. Go.

And they *had*, that was still the crazy part. They'd pulled everybody out of the flood's path. Not just Fire Nation. *Everyone*.

Like anyone would have done it. Like it didn't occur to them *not* to do it.

Like Zuko had let Aang go in the middle of a storm, instead of get in the middle of them rescuing an old fisherman...

"Sokka?" Hakoda frowned, concerned.

Sokka held up a hand; *wait a second*. Walked to the bulkhead, and splayed his fingers against steel. Stronger than wood. Stronger than almost anything. Except one horrible night at the North Pole. "I think... maybe... I figured out why Aang ticks the Fire Nation off."

His father chuckled. "You mean, besides the whole Avatar thing."

"Actually, yeah," Sokka admitted. "I told you about when Zuko raided our village?"

"Katara told me a bit more."

Sokka reddened. "Well, anyway... The jerkbender waited for me to charge him. Twice. The guards didn't stop me. He did." He chewed that thought a little more, no matter how sore it'd left him.

"They let it be a fair fight. Kind of."

"Fair?" Hakoda gave him a skeptical glance.

"Point is, I had a chance," Sokka shrugged. "Not a *good* chance. Kind of like a tiger-seal up against a polar bear."

Which wasn't a one-sided fight. Tiger-seals had teeth, too. If the polar bear missed that first lunge, and the tiger-seal could scoot into the water, under ice? Bye-bye dinner.

Hakoda nodded, obviously thinking of that himself. "Go on."

"So... fighting the Avatar's like fighting the whole ocean," Sokka stated. "Or a volcano - did I tell you about the volcano? That was scary... Yeah. So when the world tries to kill Fire Nation guys? The decent ones, like Iroh - they *stop* fighting. They *save* people."

Hakoda raised skeptical brows.

"Some of them do," Sokka insisted. "When Zuko took Aang at the North Pole? I would have left him on the ice. I don't think he would have left me. Killed me, maybe. But not left me."

"Firebenders are crazy," Hakoda observed. "We knew that."

"Right. They're crazy, and they don't know when to give up," Sokka agreed. "But they believe in a fair fight. At least a one-on-one fight," he amended, at his father's skeptical glance. "If we can pull this invasion off, if Aang can *beat* the Fire Lord - we might really win it. Aang takes down Ozai, everybody else is loyal to the Fire Lord; he tells them to stop, then they'll stop."

Well, except for Zuko. Sokka was really hoping Zuko wasn't going to be a problem after the Fire Lord went down, because seriously? Sure, Aang was the Avatar. But Zuko was *ticked off*.

Katara was alive because Wan Shi Tong had ignored one puny, ticked-off human. He hoped the owl *still* had a headache.

Heh. What are big brothers for?

"I hear a *but*," Hakoda said thoughtfully.

"Umm..."

"The plan seems simple, if a little shaky on details," Hakoda observed. "We fight our way in as a distraction. Aang faces and defeats the Fire Lord during the eclipse, when no firebender can... oh."

"Yeah," Sokka said grimly. "Oh."

"One boy bending earth, air, and water, against a man without his fire." Hakoda mulled it over. "You have a point. But this is still our best chance. We need to beat them, first. The Avatar can pound it into their heads that they *are* beaten later."

"I'm not arguing with that." Sokka held up his hands. "But if we do this, we can't let Aang go after Ozai alone. He'll get killed."

His father studied him for a long, sober moment. "Run that by me again?"

"Zuko doesn't need firebending to kick somebody's butt," Sokka laid it out. "He throws fire at Aang, sure - Aang's always bending back at him as hard as he can. But I know up close and personal that Zuko does *not* need to bend to hurt somebody." He paused. "Zuko can take me down, barehanded. I don't like saying that, but he can. What do you think his *dad* can do?"

Hakoda straightened his shoulders, concerned. "You don't think Aang would let him get that close."

"Yeah, I do," Sokka sighed. "If Ozai tried talking to him? He would. He sat down and waited for *Azula* when she was chasing us. To try and talk her out of it."

That gave Hakoda pause. "He does like to talk."

"He has to," Sokka said. "He can't kill."

Hakoda covered a cough. "I think the Fire Navy would disagree."

"I know. The Avatar kills," Sokka shrugged. "Aang? He can't. He *won't*. I'm not saying he hasn't, he's knocked a dozen tanks off mountains - but face to face? Looking Ozai in the eye?" Sokka shook his head.

"Sokka's right."

...And his heart could get right back out of his throat now, *thank* you. "Toph!" Sokka sputtered. "How did you sneak down here?"

Smirking out of the shadows, Toph pointed back toward the ladder. "Duh. Metalbender? I ask it not to make a noise, it doesn't."

"Hmm. That could be handy." Hakoda rubbed his chin, blue beads glinting as he bent his head toward her blind gaze. "So you're worried about Aang as well."

"Oh yeah." She didn't sound happy about it, bare feet stepping precisely across the deck toward-

Sokka gulped. "Toph, stop!"

She did. Inches away. Thank the spirits. "What's on the floor, Sokka?"

"Ah... umm..."

"It feels kind of like rust. Only not. And it's all over the ship. Though you guys tried to clean up a lot of it." She faced his way. "Is it what I think it is?"

Oh hell. This is Toph. "If you think it's blood? Yeah."

The little earthbender nodded, shoulders slumped a little. "I figured." She brushed dark bangs off her face, and listened Hakoda's way. "Aang ask anybody how you got this ship?"

"I don't think he has," Hakoda answered, surprised. "Why would he?"

"And nobody's told him."

Both Water Tribesmen eyed her; Sokka rolling his eyes as he realized, once again, it was just going to bounce off. "It's kind of obvious?"

"Uh-huh," Toph said skeptically. "Aang gets grumpy if you bring back *meat*, Sokka. What do you think he'd say if this-" her toe stabbed down, almost on the bloodstain, "-was *obvious*?"

"Oough." Sokka bent a little, trying to be manly; gave up, and flopped down on the deck. Or tried to. The uniform didn't exactly let you flop. "Oh, I don't feel so good."

Toph crouched down to pat his shoulder. "Yeah. Me too." She blew out a breath. "And the really bad part? I don't think we can tell him."

"We've got to," Sokka insisted. Or tried to. Somehow, he couldn't put much oomph into it.

"Yeah? Tell him, the ship you're on, the bed you're sleeping in? The food you're eating? Everybody who had that is *dead* now. So you can save the world." She winced. "Do me a favor. Put me on land first. So I can *hide*."

"He wouldn't hurt friends..." Hakoda trailed off, looking between them.

"Aang wouldn't," Sokka said heavily. "The Avatar? Yeah. Oh yeah. You heard about Roku's temple. Remind me to tell you what happened to one Earth General's fort, after he ticked Aang off."

Strong arms wrapped around both of them, as Hakoda pulled them together in a hug. "We'll work something out. One step at a time." He grinned wryly at them. "After all, we're going to be a little busy for anyone to be worrying about little details of how we got this ship. There's this little problem we have to get past, called the Fire Navy..."

Chapter End Notes

Kagemusha - "shadow warrior". Impersonator or decoy.

About Space Whale Aesops... try Japanese Tales by Royall Tyler, Beowulf, or really any work of folktales out there. And look at the behavior of Hei Bai, Wan Shi Tong, Koh, and Koizilla in canon. Spirits and fantastical creatures do not act to teach people lessons. They act because they can. Sometimes they strike out because they've been offended - whether or not said offende is still anywhere in the area. (Hei Bai, I'm looking at you.) Sometimes they're subject to flattery and clever approaches. (Wan Shi Tong.) But most of the time they're just there, and a human who happens to stumble into crossing them is in for a very bad time, indeed.

And sometimes the obvious answer is the best one. Toph wasn't so much a target for

breaking rules as for being 1) a strong bender, 2) who's fought spirits before, and thus is "visible" as a legitimate target (no, Wan Shi Tong has not forgotten who held up his library!), and 3) out of immediate sight of the Avatar when said spirit-kraken got the munchies.

BTW, in Japanese folklore - giant centipedes are the mortal enemies of dragons.

Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Familiar clawed hands settled near his on the rail. Zuko managed not to flinch. Flinching might draw Shirong's attention; and he wanted the agent's mind on Lieutenant Teruko, critiquing his bending. Not on one tired, rage-burned-out firebender.

Worse, if he flinched, Shidan would wonder why. And he couldn't explain, he *couldn't*-

"Your uncle," Shidan chuckled quietly, "is currently warning Captain Jee that I am about to do something spectacularly drastic."

Zuko eyed him. "Are you?"

"Not that I know of." Shidan gripped steel with no little satisfaction. "Though I find it interesting that one so oddly untutored in dragons can recognize the signs." Pale gold eyes slid toward him.

I am not going to blush.

"You have carried a heavy burden many years, and I wish we had been able to lighten it," Shidan said gravely. "I can tell you that I was acting for Byakko. That I was carrying out your great-grandfather's wishes, to protect that which we of Byakko have long kept safe. That you are not the first of our clan to be sacrificed to Byakko's need, and certainly not the last. But my daughter chose her fate. You did not."

Zuko's jaw tightened.

"You should know," Shidan said deliberately, "you are far more than any revenge."

"Makoto was a liar and a murderess," Zuko gritted out. "Sozin killed a whole people, who'd never done anything to him! How could you ever let my mother marry *that* for anything *but* revenge?"

"Because we are the blood of dragons," Shidan said levelly. "And if your mother failed to tell you why she did love your father, then it falls to me."

My mother? He didn't know what to feel. Confused, definitely. Angry; after everything his father had done, his mother still-

I have to know.

Rigid, Zuko nodded.

"Sozin and Makoto were ruthless, surely," Shidan stated. "Swift to strike at those they named foes. Clever and cunning, to snare those foes so they could not escape; to turn their own blood against them, suborning the onmitsu themselves to Sozin's will. Masters of fire; Sozin could tame even volcanoes, given time to beguile their flame with his own. Determined. Indomitable. *Unkillable*. Save by grief, as Sozin's slew him at last. For once he did call Roku friend." Shidan paused, three deliberate heartbeats. "What, of that, should any clan not wish to claim as its own blood?"

Zuko swallowed dryly. "But I-"

"There is also," Shidan said wryly, "the fact that your father is not unhandsome."

Zuko's fingers clenched on steel. *Not* reaching for the scar.

"Shh... shh, cub, none of that." Regret laced Shidan's voice, but pale gold held nothing of pity.

"You were brave. Remember that, and that you did what was right. Scars? Hah! I should show you my own. Wandering for Byakko is often interesting, but never safe. You survived, grandson. You live, and are not broken. That is the strength of your line! The strength we wished to steal for our own, through Ursa's children." He paused. "I would wish my grandson well, if he would accept my blessing."

They wanted me. Not... not just another plan. "She loved him?" Zuko whispered. "What he's done... what I know he's going to keep doing..."

"What he has *done*, yes," Shidan said firmly. "He is a dark dragon, and it is likely his death would be the saving of our people. But Ozai's evil is his choice. As it was Azulon's, and Sozin's, and Makoto's. Iroh and Lu Ten chose otherwise." He waved a hand to encompass the ship, the river, the green forest crowding almost down to the shore. "Let the world say Sozin's blood is evil. They know *nothing*. Your blood is Sozin's, and Makoto's, and mine. And none of us - none! - can choose for you."

"Not even Roku?" Zuko said sourly.

Heat shimmered over Shidan's shoulders. "Hmph. I admit, that man's heritage would give any sane parent pause. But your uncle survived it. Even if he does have the family obsession with tea."

Zuko blinked. Cast a look askance at the dragon. "Oh, he didn't."

"Calming tea," Shidan said dryly.

Zuko tried not to snicker.

"Did I want to be *calmed*, I would meditate," the dragon went on huffily. "I do *not* wish to be calm. I have risked Byakko. I have set a plan in motion that may - *may* - disguise why I have taken some Yu Yan in a fashion that will aid us all. I have found a yāorén, unlooked-for, and kept him alive and in fair health until we could find help. I have found my grandson, and learned he knows less of his heritage than his mother knew when she was a toddling cub at my knee. The spirits are stirring, the world is in chaos, and all I love is at risk. I am *irritated*. I have earned the *right* to be irritated. Were this Byakko, I would have climbed the mountain by now, to play with the lava Shirotora grants us. And hopefully fry whatever foe might be so foolish as to follow me. But it is not, and I have not such luxury. Pity. *Tea!*"

Almost, Zuko choked back a laugh. But one word had caught his ears. "Lava?" he breathed. "I thought - the scrolls said only the Avatar, and the Fire Lord..."

"And where did they learn it?" Shidan arched a brow. And studied him. "Most cannot master it, no. Even many dragons can only do as Kuzon was able to; guide it roughly, to save their own lives. But it flows, like water. I wonder..." He reached out.

Zuko flinched. *If he touches me, he'll know. He'll know. I should leave, I should-*

But this was Shidan. And he was so tired of running.

Fingers halted, not touching. "You know I mean you no harm."

"I know," Zuko whispered. "I don't want to hurt you."

Shidan tilted his head, curious and wary. A wariness that seemed to shift, suddenly, with the slightest widening of pale gold.

He knows. He can't know - but he knows.

Trying not to think, Zuko took Shidan's hand. Warm fingers, a fiery prickle of connection-

Don't be afraid, young one. We are kin, and I would never- Shock. Amazement. A kitten-prickle of amusement, braided with sudden worry. ...*Oh.*

An echo between them, as the spirit-in-flesh that was a dragon felt his own spirit. And knew it, in a rush of worry and love and laughter, sparkling like a brook in the sun-

Of course, Shidan chuckled in his mind. *Who else could have made such a glorious mess?*

Zuko winced. Mess was the word for it, all right-

Stop. Grandson, my own heart's brother - stop. Shidan drew him closer, a delicate hug. *The Face-Stealer's plan snares all in his web. What could the world need more, than someone to break the strands?*

Zuko started, almost pulling loose. He *knew* what web Shidan referred to, that Koh's was only a lesser part of. And for the dragon to favor breaking that-!

Shidan smiled a little. "Yes, I know. I am a creature of spirit as well as flesh; how can I call for tearing the web the Great Spirits weave for us? But you forget; I *know* you have forgotten, the path you took strips memory to its bones... We are *Agni's* creatures. Earth, air, water; they weave the very stuff of creation, and draw strength from its pattern. They follow the pulse of the world, and bend to its spirit, the Avatar. But fire's task is otherwise. Fire *burns*."

"Agni the Trickster," Zuko whispered.

"Agni who watches over the world, to see where the weave tangles, threatening to halt the loom forever," Shidan nodded. "Who burns away the old, when he must, so that which survives can weave onward. You are not the first to walk this path."

Zuko swallowed dryly. "I'm not?"

"No, cub," Shidan said gently. "It is a rare gift; even Agni does not lightly burn what the world has woven. But this *is* his gift to give. The blessing - of no blessing at all."

Zuko blinked, thinking that through. And made sure he had one hand on the rail. His knees felt a little shaky. "I have no luck."

"No sign of the spirits' favor, save bending," Shidan agreed. "No light burning about you for spirits to see; as I have, or Iroh, or your sister. You are a ghost. A mist. Fire burning through pine roots, unseen to those who walk the earth." A callused hand rested on his. "You are Agni's knife in the dark. Strike truly."

"I don't know what I'm doing," Zuko admitted in a rush. "It's all messed up. Aang doesn't even try to understand us, I don't know what to say to Uncle, I don't know what to *do* next, we got this far and- I came up with a plan, when I thought all the airbenders were dead. Establish a domain. *Our* domain. Let people be what they want to be, and protect the Northern Air Temple. They're already living in the air. I thought, if airbending was ever born back into the world, it'd be there. But if there are airbenders, that's not why the world is out of balance..." *And if it's not, I don't - I don't*

know how to fix it. Fix anything.

"It is, and it is not," Shidan said thoughtfully, nails scraping a shivery thin sound on steel. "The onmitsu, the yamabushi, the Touzaikaze... they all live, yes. But they are not a *nation*. They live by the grace of other powers, of fire and earth, warding them from harm. They are not a force in their own right, feared and honored by all the world." He paused. "And the Autumn Lord has always had an attitude problem."

Zuko shot him a look.

Shidan blinked, lazily amused. "I am a dragon. We are *hatched* with attitude problems."

"Uncle always told me I got it from my father," Zuko grumbled.

Shidan laughed, a warm ripple of *kin* and *safe*. "I fear not. You come by it honestly. On all sides."

"...Oh." It was a pure, guilty relief. Just wanting to lose his temper and fry something *didn't* make him like his father. That was - good. Kind of.

"Actions, not wishes," Shidan said firmly, the grave look in his eyes and warm whisper of *shh*, *silly cub* making it clear he'd felt that guilt. "We are born to prey on the weak and the fearful. It is our nature, to stalk and ambush and kill." A quiet breath. "But we are more than nature. Agni gifted us with thought, and choice. We may choose to be monsters. Or we may choose to *think*. To give our violence to the service of our clans, and strike only when it is *right*."

"Dark dragons?" Zuko said quietly. *My sister...*

"They, too, have a choice." Shidan sighed. "A starker choice than ours, for something within them is missing. But it is a choice." He frowned. "Iroh said Healer Amaya tried to help your sister. I am - uncertain. A fire-healer could not help her, that I do know. But water is family, and it is that, above all, dark dragons lack. I wonder."

"She did try to kill me later," Zuko pointed out. "Again."

"Damn." Shidan looked into the distance, letting go of regret and frail hope in one determined breath. "Well. Airbenders." He frowned. "Your plan may be best after all. If the Air Temple stands as its own nation; if you protect it as an ally, a neighboring clan, and not within your own domain... it *might* be enough to soothe Air's injured pride."

"Pride," Zuko snorted.

"Not something one associates with monks?" Shidan said wryly. "Hah! What is it, to think you can wander the world without ever lifting a hand in anger, and believe your shining example will inspire all to never raise weapons against you? Arrogance, yes, that is the weakness of fire. But air? *Pride*."

Zuko almost said something... then closed his mouth, thinking it over.

"The yamabushi and onmitsu shelter under Fire's wings," Shidan went on. "The Touzaikaze... the Earth King may not have seen them for centuries, but the desert they roam is within his kingdom. And as for their lost oases - Zuko?"

For a moment, he could *see* it. The river hidden beneath windswept desert spires, where none would ever look. The silver-and-peacock carp-minnows, and lotuses, and bison grazing on river cane. The high rippled-stone curtains of the caves, marked only by climbing vines and airbenders'

bare feet, before the foxes had come...

That's why Misty Palms Oasis dried up. Wan Shi Tong blocked the waters.

Then. Now? "Wan Shi Tong's been banished from the Earth Kingdom."

For once, he got to see Shidan stunned. "How?"

"Kuei's tougher than he looks," Zuko smirked. "One of the foxes got greedy, and the Earth King threw them all out. *And* the owl." He waved a hand at *Suzuran*. "Not long before we got there, but-

"

"Long enough, with the *leste* shamans ever hunting for a way home." Shidan snarled in anticipation. "Good. Good! Already, a knot is cut!" The dragon drew a breath. "You should draw your clan together this eve; I will tell you what I can of the knots that remain." Then he smirked.

"An Earth King with spirit. That, the world has not seen in some time."

"Spirit-bending. Amaya says he's going to be one of the best." Zuko grimaced. "He's going to need it, after giving us part of the Earth Kingdom."

"*Giving* you-?" Shidan shook his head, incredulous. "Grandson. Just what happened in Ba Sing Se?"

This isn't how I thought I'd go out.

With practiced calm, Yakume kept his breathing slow and even, tallying up his situation. Nausea and splitting headache; too dark to check for doubled vision, but he'd bet on a concussion. Fingers and toes wriggled, though, so it didn't seem to be worse than that. Yet. *Only* fingers and toes wriggled; the weight of stones and street rubble on his armor, bruising enough to leave him wincing, had him pinned unless he could shift enough small bits to get better leverage. Even if he did, the blinding pain in his right knee was a clear sign he wasn't going to be walking out of here.

Hah. Not damn likely. They set the trap too well for that.

He refused to get angry. Fury enough to lift boulders did no good if he couldn't get leverage. So, calm. Admire, in a detached and calculated way, the ingenuity of the saboteur; ingenuity you almost *never* saw in the Earth Kingdom. The calmer he stayed, the longer the small pocket of air trapped with him would last.

The calmer he stayed, the less he breathed. The less he'd smell the results of what else had been buried with him.

The komodo-rhinos might have had the easiest deaths. Drop the earth out from under a half-ton beast and bury it in enough rocks for a small mountain? If their necks hadn't snapped in the fall, the shattered ribs would have finished them. As for their riders...

"*Kaasan*," whispered out of the dark.

"Steady, Private Tennen," Yakume said levelly. Wiggled his toes, grateful habit had kept his helmet on, even in the heat of early summer. Calvary armor wasn't too much lighter, but from the glimpse he'd had while they were all falling, he had a nasty feeling Tennen had gone down *sideways*.

Agni, please. He's only a child.

Well. Nineteen, if Tennen was a day. Still too young for an old soldier to want to listen to him die.

"J-Juzou and Ginji aren't..."

"They were closer to the center, son," Yakume said quietly. "I'm sorry." He forced a bit of amused snarl into his voice. "When I catch the mind behind these traps, I'm going to make sure they stay alive. Long enough to tell us *everything*."

If, the bitterly practical part of him pointed out. Whoever's clever enough to sabotage us like this won't be easily caught.

And whoever does the catching... it's not going to be you.

No, likely not. There would have to be someone looking for them to find them, and given the street pit trap had been cleverly set up to hold the weight of people, yet collapse under the rhinos, and the rumbles that had made it clear there were more than just the pit which had taken them...

The odds were high there were more traps, waiting under stone for the rescuers. Possibly even earthbenders - and this terrain would be perfect for earthbenders.

General Iroh would have seen them rescued. No matter what it took. The forces Princess Azula had left in command?

I doubt it.

Miya and their boys would survive. Say what you liked about some of the noble idiots in Onsenzakura, the resort town was far enough north to have been out of the war for decades. Even if their clans hadn't been there, veteran's wives looked after each other. His family would be all right.

Enough fretting. Is there anything else you can do?

Hmm. The rubble had settled somewhat. Carefully, Yakume tried to twist.

Pain is only a warning. Do what you must.

Stone crackled and muttered, pieces rattling as the master sergeant tried to squirm from flat on his back to leaning more on his right. His knee was going to hate him, but the rubble seemed a little thinner on that side. By feel, at least. He couldn't see anything.

He hoped that was because of the dark.

Stay calm. Panic uses air faster. Be calm.

"Master Sergeant?" More clattering rocks.

"Stay still, Private!" Yakume barked. Damn. Not his imagination. He could hear the pain-wracked gasp, the hint of liquid in the breath that spoke of organs injured, lungs punctured-

Agni, don't let him die here. Not in the dark.

"Stay still." Yakume forced his voice level. "I'm going to come to you." *If I have to tear down a mountain to do it.*

Hands in shattered stone, he hesitated. He couldn't see what he was doing. One wrong move could bring the whole pile crashing down.

Better a quick death than lingering in the dark. Put away fear. Act.

He wasn't facing toward Tennen... but he wasn't more than a compass-quarter away, either. Which might be to their advantage. Digging a curving tunnel would create less of a long void in the pile, making it less likely to shift suddenly and catastrophically. He hoped.

Never would have thought I'd be glad this isn't my first cave-in.

He'd told Lu-shan the truth, after all. He *didn't* like the Earth Kingdom. He knew them too well.

The pit traps are new.

Which was more than a little worrisome. One of the reasons their army had carved off as much of the Earth Kingdom as they had over the past century was Earth's military doctrine. Unfailing, unflinching, all but unassailable in their fortresses so long as their nerves and supplies held out... yet also unchanging. Walls were sacred. Walls were defended. Walls marked *yours* and *other*.

Scar the earth with pits to trap your enemy before he could reach your walls? Those of earth wouldn't like it, but they'd do it. Destroy *your own walls and streets* to kill an enemy? Unthinkable.

Only someone thought of it.

Had thought it out partway, at least, Yakume decided. The trap was only a pit, a sinkhole cracking open once enough weight marched on top. No sand to smother and suffocate. No spikes at the bottom to pierce through armor like seaweed gel.

Like the ruin and fire he'd dealt with at Lu-shan's side that horrible night. Like dozens of other petty and violent disruptions of life in the rings of Ba Sing Se. Dangerous. Distracting. Lethal. Yet not as lethal as they could have been.

Someone's fighting us. Fighting hard. But they're not a soldier. They'll kill us if they have to. But slaughter? No.

...And he was going to think about that, as he pried at the rubble between himself and Private Tennen. He was going to think of their opponent, who they were, why they might think they were doing this, and not the dead around him. He would honor his fellow soldiers' deaths, and *find* the mind responsible for this ambush.

And while he was at it, he'd spare a few curses for High Command. Take the generals out of the city. Deprive the earthbenders and their army of leadership. *Wonderful* idea.

Only someone was leading the rebel earthbenders. Someone who definitely wasn't a general. Agni, it was as if they didn't even know Earth Army doctrine-

Wrestling with a boulder the size of a rice sack, Yalume froze. Listened to creaks, and held still as loose bits pattered off his helmet.

An amateur. We're fighting a civilian.

A very determined civilian, who apparently had the authority to order earthbenders to carry out the unthinkable. Given how the Earth Kingdoms worked, that *had* to be a noble.

Which, again, made no sense. He'd heard more than enough about all the nobles in this city...

All the nobles, Yakume realized, except one.

A chill danced down his spine-

Yakume opened his mouth, drawing in a breath that tasted of earth and death... and of a cool dryness like cold northern winds. *Air. That's air!*

And where there was a breeze, there was a route to the surface. "Here!" He tried not to cough, dust coating his tongue. "We're down here!"

Silence. One pebble clicked, distant in the darkness.

The earth *roared*.

Coughing, Yakume blinked at the long shadows of sunset. Against his will, he leaned into the familiar hands dragging him out of the wreckage. "Captain Lu-shan-"

"Formal even if it kills you," the Guard captain complained, half-carrying him clear. "Why am I not surprised?"

Yakume spat out black dust, coughed again. *Ow*. "Put me down. I'll live. Private Tennen-"

"They're getting him, you overgrown fire-striker. Relax."

Yakume blinked, vision blurred; dust or concussion, he wasn't sure. "They?"

Sandy wraps swarmed them.

Sandbenders. Yakume's pulse jumped as the nomads moved like a walking dune, screening himself and Lu-shan from the troops he heard marching toward the disaster. *Not good*.

Sane people didn't tackle the desert, firebenders or not. The sun was their ally, yes - but desert nights were *cold*. And sandbenders didn't go to war. They raided, and faded away, never the same place twice. Only a fool made war on shifting sands.

"Stay down," Lu-shan said, gruffly gentle. "I know this tribe. Their word's good, once you get it. If any of your men are left down there, they'll find them." He tapped a dent in Yakume's armor. "Damn, that one was close."

Ow. The bruises were going to be torture, he could tell already. "I'm sure they'll get luckier one of these days." Yakume said dryly.

"I hope not."

Startled, Yakume eyed the man.

"You're a damn Fire Nation killer, and I want you the hell out of my city," Lu-shan said sharply. "But you're our damn Fire soldier, and you've kept your end of the bargain. Puts you mountains above the rest of them. I want you all gone. But if you're not gone? I'll take the man who's put his neck on the line for my streets."

Touching, Yakume thought. *Unless you were the one who gave the rebels the information to ambush us.*

No. No, he didn't think so. Lu-shan, too, had kept his end of the bargain. If he'd meant to break their fragile arrangement, the captain would have warned him first.

...Which meant it was probably someone else in the station. Damn it.

Treachery later. Casualties now. "Have they found any-"

"Stay still." One of the nomads; tall, face unwrapped in the dampness of the city, with that polished-bone look of the water-starved. His voice grated, like sand on stone. "You will frighten Amisi."

Yakume squinted through the screen of bodies, where a young woman in loose, hooded robes was turning rubble into sand to shift it away. Her moves were more fluid than most earthbenders, with an arching sway that reminded him of tall stones and moaning wind. "I see. Thank you."

One of the man's brows went up.

"You're searching for my people," Yakume said tautly. "General Iroh himself would be polite."

The glance was swift and subtle. Yakume almost missed it.

Why would a desert nomad be interested in an outlaw general?

One way to find out. "Master Sergeant Yakume." He inclined his head; as well as he could, seated on the street with battered armor and a worse knee. "Whom do I owe for this help?"

"Runihura," the nomad answered, after a long moment. "And you owe us nothing, Yakume of Onsenzakura. The Earth King has already paid your debt."

What?

"Earth King Kuei... what?" Lu-shan said in disbelief.

"The winds have changed, and the world is shifting." Runihura looked into the distance. "You are a man who seeks truth, and so I will give it to you."

Why does that sound like a threat?

"Our shamans listen to the desert. They feel the heat of the sun, lingering in the sands. They hear the wailing wind. Earth King Kuei has made alliance with the sun's blood. Those who follow it... have a choice." A last, hard look, and he vanished into the sand-hued throng.

Yakume traded a glance with Lu-shan, wondering if he looked half as rattled as the captain.

"Always knew they were weird," Lu-shan grumbled. "But - Oma and Shu, they found somebody!"

Yakume gripped his arm, and let the captain drag him along.

Tennen.

Amisi was still sifting sand, other men obviously guarding her, gripping her shoulders as she slumped and shook her head. Another young woman was bent over the private, ghosting gentle fingers along the pulse of his throat as she listened to his breath.

Heart in his throat, Yakume listened with her.

Head pillowed on dusty scraps, Tennen snored.

Yakume let out a relieved breath, pain gnawing at him again. No one with bruised lungs could snore like that.

But I was so sure...

"Let him sleep," the healer said, voice quiet as the hush before dawn. She moved her hands across Tennen's forehead, a faint scent of water-lilies wafting in her wake. "It will help."

Yakume bit back a snarl that would have sounded something like *barbarians, lack of combat medical training, and concussion*. Glanced at Lu-shan. The captain had apparently worked for years with a very *good* healer. If anyone should know one when he saw them work-

Lu-shan looked - startled. "Ma'am." He hesitated, then forged onward. "Are you... blind?"

Yakume blinked, and took a second look as she grew very still. And had to keep himself from a sardonic laugh. Granted, that was a clever bit of malachite about her eyes to give that greenish hue, but... "Haven't you ever seen gray eyes before, Captain?"

Silence. And the sudden, sinking feeling that he was surrounded.

Keep calm. The troops are coming. Keep them distracted, what did I say- oh. "You haven't, have you?" Yakume smiled bitterly. "You people are such hypocrites. Strong villages for a strong kingdom, you say. But your villages don't exist without *people*. Stiff-necked, hidebound, complacent peasants, who want every day to be just like the last. And when someone's born who doesn't fit, who reminds you there once was a time the whole Earth Kingdom feared the skies..." He snorted. "Gray eyes *happen*, Lu-shan. Even in the Water Tribes. I hear they don't like to talk about it either."

And here's where they kill me. If they dare. He kept his gaze on the healer. Those fluttering scraps she'd draped over it might disguise the blade from casual glances, but no one wore a sword at their shoulder like that unless they knew what they were doing.

"Sometimes, I don't know what the hell goes through your head," Lu-shan muttered. Cleared his throat. "I know he's insulting, but we have an arrangement-"

And... yes. Red and black in view, and closing. Yakume carefully didn't smile.

"The truth is no insult." The healer rose. "We, too, remember the raids of the White Wind."

"The... what?" Lu-shan asked, confused.

"You called them Air Nomads." She inclined her head, tucking dark strands back under her hood. "I am Eshe. And the Touzai will remember you."

They faded away from the troops, leaving Lu-shan looking at Yakume very, very oddly.

The master sergeant raised an eyebrow.

"Never would have thought the Touzai would go for... Fire Nation propaganda," the captain said dryly.

"The best lies are woven with truth." Yakume bared his teeth. "Just ask the Dai Li."

Almost automatically, both looked up at the skyline.

Nothing.

"You know," Lu-shan said, voice low, "I never thought I'd see anything spookier than Dai Li."

"Not seeing Dai Li," Yakume finished, equally quiet. He felt Tennen's pulse again. Still resting. Still steady. "What in Agni's name are they up to?"

"The mission went well?" Bon asked, keeping his voice low. He couldn't feel footsteps on the floor of the improvised library behind him; not much more than a hastily raised rock enclosure, with niches hollowed for books. Either Kuei was tearing through yet another stack of scrolls, or sleep had finally ambushed the young king and he was out cold curled up in a chair. Bon was hoping for sleep. *Bosco* was asleep, away in his den near the Earth King's chambers; the bear showing more common sense than half the people here, in Bon's opinion.

"I'm still compiling the report." Agent Quan looked tired, and just a little dusty. But there was a grim satisfaction glinting in his eyes.

"He won't appreciate being kept in the dark," Bon said firmly. "Again."

"I know. And I won't. I just..." Quan sighed. "He's still not sleeping, is he?"

"Not well, no, sir," Bon admitted. "He's a kind young man. This is hard for him." He shook his head. "I've gone over some of those scrolls Professor Wen and Healer Amaya identified for us. I can help him get some rest. But it's not as good as natural sleep."

"Then my report can wait until I have more details." With an effort, Quan shrugged it off, and smirked. "How's Operation Fainting Maid going?"

"...I hate you, sir," Bon grumbled under his breath.

"If it were easy, Long Feng would have had him married with a handful of heirs by now." Quan glanced aside, a flinch of remembered pain. "He thought that until we could find at least a few good candidates, it was better not to get the Earth King's hopes up. A pity Lady Bei Fong is so young."

"All of Ba Sing Se and we can't find one young lady with enough spiritual strength to marry the king?" Bon said skeptically.

"Earth King Luo Hua thought he had," Quan sighed. "Of all the current crop of nobles who've ever had a report of spirit contact, there's no one - *no one* - any stronger than Queen Ye Zao was. And when the Earth King was assassinated..."

Reports said the queen hadn't survived him by more than a few minutes, once the spirits were loose. A sobering bit of history Ba Sing Se tried to forget... and the Dai Li never could.

Bon shivered, and spared a glance upward, toward the far-off shafts ventilating the cavern. A necessary risk, they had to have fresh air... yet sometimes he couldn't sleep, imagining some sharp-nosed Fire soldier tracking down an odd breeze.

"I've had some of our university students working on the problem," Quan went on. "It's been a century or two, but this isn't the first time the city's nobles haven't thrown a young lady unlucky enough to draw spirits. Apparently there are tests for those with the strength of spirit we need." He shook his head. "Looking at them, I feel like an idiot. So many of them are Dai Li tests."

Bon raised his eyebrows. "The beaded robe?"

"Partner tests, blindfolding, kamui exposure - you'd recognize at least half of them." Quan grimaced. "You'll like this even better. If our archivists have uncovered the truth? When Kyoshi set

us up, there were *women* in the Dai Li."

Bon stood very still, fighting a rush of pure loneliness. He'd realized, over the past few years, that his odds of having anything like a normal family were vanishingly small. In a way, they were *too* good at their jobs. The fewer citizens who were exposed to kamuiry wrath, the fewer women who were forced to face spirits and survive. Or not.

It was the *or not* part that made sane Dai Li hesitate. Even so, once in a while, Bon had to wonder if any other Dai Li had the same dark impulse he'd fought off, one lonely night; slam up walls, let something *loose* - and bring home the survivors in the morning.

He'd never do it. But sometimes...

We give up everything for our city. Can't it give us something back?

Some agents might have relationships with a Joo Dee. But that'd always struck Bon as - well, ew.

And that, Bon my friend, is why you're still single, the agent told himself. Felt a slight breeze tug at his robes, and glanced about to be sure it was only a physical wind. There were agents keeping watch for malice, but you could never be too sure. "So if the nobles are out, and I'm guessing you've been testing our people here..."

"Earth and Fire," Quan nodded. "Smith Pei's a remarkable man, even if he is blunt as an iron ingot. He's been a great deal of help, and many of their ladies are strong. Just... not quite enough." He smiled a little, wry. "He also had the same suggestion as our priests, and a few of the students. I took them up on it."

"Which is, sir?" Bon asked warily. *Why do I have a bad feeling about this?*

"Pray."

"Pray," Bon echoed. "Right. Because it'd take a *miracle* to find spiritually strong women in the middle of a Fire Nation invasion-

Footsteps trembled through his shoes. Too light to be Kuei's. In the library, and not alone-

They were in, gloves ready to fire, before the sand-cloaked individuals could blink. "Don't move," Quan growled.

"Don't wake him," the one looking at Kuei whispered, as the pair of them held very still. "He looks so tired."

"Step back," Quan said coldly. Not at all softened by that gentle, female voice. "Slowly."

Bon slipped between the retreating nomads and the Earth King, doing a quick visual, scent, and touch check of his drowsy charge. No blood, no poisoned needles, nothing more subtle that he could detect. So far, lucky. "Sir? I'm sorry, your majesty, but I think you should wake up now."

"No, Bosco, don't eat the rock candy while it's growing..." Kuei blinked fuzzily at him, feeling around for his glasses. "Agent Bon?"

"Here, sir."

Lenses in place, Kuei blinked again, taking in the room with a dutiful - if unpracticed - attention to possible threats. "Who in the world are *you*?"

"What I was about to ask, your majesty," Quan said dryly.

"Don't blame Amisi for this," the nomad girl said softly.

"Eshe," her companion warned.

"I... I just wanted to see you," Eshe forged on. "I thought... when the shamans said what you did, I thought you'd be... scary."

Kuei blinked more sleep out of his eyes, and glanced at Bon. Who had to shrug subtly. *I have no idea what she's talking about-*

One graceful flow of color, the two young women swirled off their hooded cloaks.

...Oh. My.

Lazuli blue robes, so pure it was like looking into endless sky. Gold glimmering from jet-black hair, a brilliantly delicate headdress of hawk wings. Gray eyes, like storms, looking up from where Eshe knelt in the bow Bon knew the Earth King had never seen in his life: lesser foreign power to greater ally.

Gray eyes.

Amisi's were green, alive as the lotus patterns decorating her blue robes. But if they weren't at least cousins, Bon would eat his hat.

They're afraid. Why?

And why did he feel he ought to know those headdresses from somewhere... and spirits, how had he missed Eshe's sword-

Sorceresses! Guanyin save us, those are desert-witch wings!

"Touzaikaze," Kuei said, stunned. "You're... I thought your people were *dead*."

"Hidden," Amisi said, voice barely shaking. "For a long time. Before Wan Shi Tong drove us from our safe places. After that, things were... hard. For a long time."

"But the Owl has been driven out," Eshe stated. "We could go home."

She hid it well. But her voice wanted to break, Bon could hear it.

"Our shamans..." Eshe swallowed. "The Touzaikaze owe the Earth King a great debt. We have asked how to repay, and learned that..." Her voice dried up. She braced herself, and forged on.

"The Touzaikaze offer alliance. If you find one... acceptable."

...Oh, Bon thought, heart sinking. Oh, you poor girls.

Kuei looked as though someone had hit him with a board. Bon didn't feel much better. No wonder they were trembling.

No wonder they snuck in, either. It hadn't done his nerves any good at all, no - but offered up for a marriage alliance, just because your tribe's shamans said it was the thing to do? Arranged marriages weren't rare, but *ouch*.

Yeah. I'd do something stupid, too.

Kuei deliberately closed his jaw, and shook himself. "Where are - I mean, your family didn't make - let you come alone..."

"Uncle Runihura and Cousin Haqikah are probably meeting your guards right now," Amisi dared. "The Fire Nation can't find you the way we did, but I don't think that will make them feel better."

"Don't be so sure they can't find us, Lady Amisi," Kuei said sharply. "Princess Azula has left the city with her airbender, but there may be more."

Gray and green eyes went wide. "The Fire Princess has an airbender?" Eshe whispered.

"Sir?" Quan's voice was dry. "Before we listen to any more spirit-tales, I want to know *how they got in here*."

Bon added up desert legends, and what his king had said, and that out of place breeze... "Through the air shafts." He swallowed, stunned. "*You're* airbenders."

Eshe inclined her head. "No one is surprised, when wind sculpts the dunes."

"Or when dunes shape the wind," Amisi finished. "Many of us are sandbenders, your majesty. Some... are not."

Kuei took a deep breath. "Rise. Please. Your shamans... they've made a mistake."

Uneasy, the young ladies glanced at each other.

"The Earth King's line cares for the spirits of Ba Sing Se," Kuei said firmly. "We must be strong. We have to have the power to deal with spirits. But after all that, we have to *care*."

Eshe bit her lip, and looked aside in demure disagreement. "We do care. We are - we have a duty to our people, to the desert's spirits, as you do to the city's. We are here of our own will, freely."

Right, Bon thought, not believing a word of it. *When going against the tribe's will gets you abandoned in the deep desert with no waterskin*. He'd heard about the desert nomads. Who hadn't?

Still. Airbenders?

"You're here, but you're scared." Kuei winced, obviously trying to find a better way to say it, then giving up. "It won't work."

They flinched.

Damn. If the shaman's told them to come, they probably can't go back... "What his majesty's trying to say," Bon put in, thinking fast, "is that the royal family's bonds of compassion are as essential as power to deal with the city's spirits. Discord in the king's bloodline leads to chaos in the city. It leads to death. Horrible, widespread, and spirit-cursed... and we do not have enough Dai Li to save the city from another night as we suffered twenty years ago." He cast a glance at Kuei. "The Earth King's marriages have often been arranged. But that was usually when they were princes, and parents could allow young men and ladies to meet, and see if they might at least like each other..." *Come on, pick up, I know you have no experience at all, but - oh, who am I kidding? You're clueless-*

"Does that sword still mean you're a healer?" Kuei blurted out. "Some of the scrolls I have - here, let me show you..."

...*Back to the books*. Bon sighed, as Kuei almost tripped over his robes in his haste to show their two attractive intruders a scroll. *Well, it could have been worse*.

Eshe touched the spread paper respectfully, some of the tremors easing out of her hands. "A work of Na-Au the Lame... have you read this?"

"A long time ago," Kuei admitted. "And then, after we found the earth-healing scrolls - we need all the healers we can get, I thought it might help-" He looked down at her. And hastily up a little. Looking at gray eyes. Firmly.

I'm not going to laugh.

"If your tribe wants an alliance - we can use your help. We can use anybody's help. But if you want... more than that..." Kuei swallowed. "Would you like to meet my people?"

Chapter End Notes

Leste - a hot, intensely dry easterly wind that blows autumn through spring, accompanied by clouds of fine red sand.

Why yes, I do love *Bridge of Birds*. One of the best fantasies ever.

Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

Is it just me, or is Azula scarier when she's sane?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Studying her maps as the tank approached the harbor, Azula considered a triangle of betrayal.

Byakko. Pohuai Stronghold. The Northern Air Temple.

The last seemed foolish on the face of things. But Uncle Iroh *believed* in spirits, in tradition, and in honor to the restless dead. Sane commanders would only see a crushing defeat in the North. Uncle... would see something far more dire.

Dire enough to drive him into blatant treachery? And take my brother with him?

She still didn't have as many details about her brother's escape from the North as she wanted. She had more, now, certainly; hawks to Onsenzakura and other places her brother had been sighted had made sure of that. But how, exactly, her brother and uncle had managed to last three weeks on a makeshift raft in the middle of the Northern seas with only scavenged supplies...

Zuzu always was hard to kill.

Azula wouldn't have liked to try it herself. She could admit that. With no one else in the room. It would have been... stressful.

Hmm. And most people are too weak to deal with stress properly.

Given her brother had never quite gotten a grip on the restful habit of working out frustrations by finding someone to barbecue, a few days with Uncle at a spa wouldn't have been *nearly* enough to calm down.

...Then again, given the choice between a few days at a spa with Uncle, and a few *weeks* fighting off sea vultures, the spa might have been *worse*.

Trapped with tea, Uncle flirting with any pretty girl in sight, and laziness. Zuko must have been climbing the walls. Azula grimaced. I miscalculated. Badly.

Either she should have grabbed them as soon as they'd hit shore - impossible, unfortunately - or waited a few days for Zuko to pry himself loose from Iroh and start hunting the area for Avatar-sign again. She should have found an excuse to linger in the harbor, simply *there*, rather than approach directly. There had to have been a bit of bribery and smuggling at the docks she could deal with for the throne. There was *always* smuggling on docks.

And interrogations were so amusing.

Well. She hadn't, her brother had still been jumpy enough to react like a soldier under boulder fire, and that idiot captain had opened his mouth. Ah well.

So now her brother and uncle were loose - she'd *never* assumed Ty Lee had killed him, *she* hadn't managed it yet, and Gaipan's reports confirmed she still hadn't - and they'd caught up with one of the few people in the Fire Nation she never would have expected to openly defy the Fire Lord.

Though Shidan of Byakko hadn't. Quite. Supposedly.

Either my spy of a grandfather is utterly sincere, or he's playing our enemies against the Fire Lord.

Dangerous, treacherous - and all too likely. Byakko had never really believed in a unified Fire Nation, no matter what Avatar Kyoshi might have decreed. Byakko believed in *Byakko*. Anyone outside was a potential threat.

Which wasn't *entirely* unreasonable, Azula had to admit. Shirotora wasn't a tame caldera like the capital. Byakko's mountain was a monster on a leash of lives, only willing to lie down because it chose to. How could anyone focus on conquering the world when they had a permanent test of wills in their own backyard?

From such a self-absorbed, selfish domain, what could anyone expect *but* betrayal?

They were at war. They were bare months away from needing the Yu Yan in the capital for the eclipse. Stealing some of them right out from under their commander's nose, making it blatantly obvious that was exactly what Shidan was doing? Lady Kotone's explanation to the Fire Lord *had* to be a lie...

Yet Byakko was known for not lying.

They were careful with the truth. And sometimes suspiciously silent. Reliable sources of Azula's own among the Fire Nation's spies said Shidan was under orders from Kotone *never* to enter the palace. Or approach the Fire Lord. Ever.

Given Azula's own suspicions about her mother's fate, the order made perfect sense. Not that she doubted her father could handle the matter. But it would be so *messy*.

Mother never lied, either.

She'd known that, as long as she could remember. Which was why Ursa's words *hurt*. She *was* a monster. And if Ty Lee was her friend, it was because the acrobat wasn't much different. Air didn't love. Didn't *feel* the way normal people did. No one could love a monster-

Zuko loves you.

Damn that Water Tribe woman.

Though it might even be true. No one had ever accused her brother of *sense*.

Which meant that insane as it seemed, Azula had to consider the other option. What if Lady Kotone's private message to the Fire Lord was *true*?

Azula traced the river up from Gaipan, along the coast, across northern seas. And around, to where a hidden band of Earth Kingdom refugees had built war machines atop a mountain dedicated to peace. And then revolted, with the Avatar's willing help.

They control the air.

Which was exactly what the Yu Yan were meant to fight. If fighting was what Shidan had in mind;

Kotone's message had mentioned using rumors of traitors to the Fire Nation, like Jeong Jeong, to convince the poor fools to *let* them in.

And now, with my brother and uncle, the rumor is truth. Azula tapped a nail against the map, a raindrop-pattering of thought.

If Zuko really is like Mother... perhaps he's telling the truth, too.

The Northern Air Temple and its Mechanist were valuable war resources. Leaving them free to fight for the Avatar was unacceptable. Letting them fall into a *traitor's* grasp-

Azula raised an eyebrow. Considering treachery, and her brother, and the report from Sergeant Aoi and his men.

Zuko helped the Avatar. But he is not with the Avatar.

The airbender, in point of fact, had allowed Earth General Gang to assault and trap the *Suzuran*. Bad luck for the general. And far, far worse for the Avatar.

A pity Great-grandfather Sozin hadn't lived to see it. How he'd have *laughed*.

Healing fire could fracture our nation. But we can deal with a civil war. First, we have to survive.

And in that one failure to act, Avatar Aang had ensured they would. How deliciously ironic.

You think my brother is a fool, Avatar. He is. You think he is harmless, helpless to stop you. You think he is alone.

And there, you fail.

He is not alone. He is not an idiot. If you drove him off, if you made him abandon someone he tried to help, when even exile did not break him of clinging to his duty...

Azula considered that, and her brother's simmering rage. And smiled.

Zuko and Uncle will take the Temple. They will deny it to you.

And you have only yourself to blame.

She'd have to make sure word reached the Avatar when Zuko succeeded. Rumors, to start; casual, outlandish things the airbender would try to laugh off... and shiver at, in the depths of the night. Then a scattering of firmer facts. And then... oh, and *then*...

Chuckling, Azula scratched nails lightly along steel. Kill the Avatar, and another would be born. Crush his spirit, crush his *hope*, and they would win without fighting.

She frowned then, and traced the map again. The problem was the skies. Or rather, one particular sky bison. So long as the Avatar could travel freely by air, he could return to the Temple and win its foolish inhabitants over again. The Yu Yan would oppose him, but even they couldn't fight an Avatar and hostile civilians on the ground at the same time-

Her eye fell on an Earth Kingdom fortress in the north, where the Avatar had been reported at winter's end. A fortress whose general had tried to leash the Avatar's power to destroy the Fire Nation - and didn't care how many died in the process.

"Now what would General Fong do," Azula mused, "if he learned Ji the Mechanist worked for the

Fire Nation?"

Timing would be critical. She'd have to calculate *Suzuran's* speed, how fast Fong would come to a decision, how swiftly he could move his troops for the assault. And coordinate it all by hawks, as she made her way across the ocean as a dutiful daughter. But with a little work...

If Fong killed Zuko - *not* likely - Iroh would kill him. Which would rid the Fire Nation of two thorns in one blow. If Fong *didn't* kill her brother...

General Fong was a known vicious, arrogant noble hothead of an earthbender. The methods he would use on civilians who'd fled to the highest mountains in hopes of being *left alone*... would be extreme.

Enjoy your present, Zuzu.

Jammed into Iroh's cabin with most of his family, Tingzhe polished his reading glasses and gave Shidan a look of frank annoyance. "What sort of *gift* of a tale do you have, that a child can't hear it?" *And what sort of family gathering is this, that leaves out my son, yet includes...*

Well. If Amaya were here with Iroh and Zuko, it made sense to bring Mai and Lieutenant Teruko in as well. Both Fire Nation ladies had made their interests quite clear. Even if Meixiang had had to explain certain... *implications* to knife-sharpening. On both sides.

He still wasn't sure whether to be amused or aghast at his wife trading comments with the marine about choosing your level of grit. He wasn't quite sure he wanted to know.

And possibly it made sense for Langxue and Saoluan to be here. Teacher and student could be as tight a bond as family, and the youngest yāorén would need Zuko's training as much as Jinhai did. Certainly he was no airbender - but the prince was the only living person on the ship who'd ever *fought* one.

Still. Why?

"You may tell Jinhai of it later, if you wish," the elderly firebender said gravely. "But it is our custom that such tales are not to be gifted to those too young to-" He paused. Cleared his throat. Eyed Jia and Suyin - and, surprising Tingzhe, Langxue and Zuko. "One needs to be of a certain... age."

"Ooo." Saoluan smirked. "There's *sex* in this."

Langxue reddened. Min blinked. And Zuko looked as if he wanted to sink through the floor.

Tingzhe eyed a beaming Iroh, and felt very sorry for the boys.

"Yes," Shidan admitted warily. "There is also death. And betrayal. And a great many complicated things. It is not knowledge that should be within children. It is dangerous." He smiled gently. "But it is also a beautiful tale, and one that has come too close to being lost. My daughters all know it, but Ursa left while Zuko was too young for its gift. I would remedy that."

"So we have to listen jammed in like sardine-herrings?" Jia muttered under her breath.

"We need to be close enough to join hands, young lady," Shidan answered, unperturbed. "It is the only proper way to live the tale."

Live the tale? Tingzhe wondered, clasping Meixiang's right hand as his own gripped Shirong's, and the Dai Li in turn gripped Zuko's. *Doesn't he mean hear-*

Shidan's eyes closed, and the world *shifted*.

So loud-flocking-weaponsdown is a human-gathering, Ryuuko-hime thought, crouched next to a few tumbled boulders as the two-legged group arranged wood, rocks, and various odd containers. *When oddhumans not trying to kill each other.*

Not that they ever seemed to really kill each other. They'd gather in separate groupings, posture and yell, and charge each other with the long metal claws they called *swords*. Yet no matter how much damage they did to each other, they always seemed to stop short of killing blows. Even the most seriously injured human was always up and around in a few days. She'd hidden near one of the display-fights just to watch their healers work. It was magical.

Healing notfire notwater notair notearth. Not of here. No wonder Father-of-Fire worries.

And when elders claimed Father-of-Fire was worried, a wise young dragon investigated.

Besides. Humans were turning out to be *fun* to watch.

Like now. Some of the humans had already pegged into the ground the colored web-like shelters their mouth-noises named *tents*. Others were setting up *folding tables* and *chairs*, or building fires in circles of rock to burn wood for no obvious reason. They didn't heal with fire, so why-?

Lookthere! Kingami!

Ryuuko-hime held still, not even letting her tail twitch in interest. Yes, they were *supposed* to use numbers to refer to the humans. There were so many of them. And no one knew which spirits were supposed to look after these strange creatures. Naming them could be dangerous.

But the gold-maned one was kind. He always killed his food cleanly. He walked carefully along cliffs, never stirring stones to strike the unwary below. And often, like now, he had the human-young gathered around him, chattering away like sparrowkeets as he arranged rocks in two linked circles, lighting a fire in one and-

Oh, *interesting*.

In the larger circle Kingami had a fire burning steady and even. As it burned, he used a steel paw, a *shovel*, to scoop embers from the large to the small, until he had a ready bed of coals. Neatly done, for one who could not bend fire. So what was he doing now?

Wind brought the rich scent as Kingami lifted dripping meat from a container. Ryuuko-hime licked her fangs. Mmm... an odd spice-scent from the sauces slathered over it. But it was meat, being propped on a net of steel to *properly* cook, and maybe humans weren't as strange as they looked after all. Even if they used throat-rumbles of words and ears, instead of touch and heart.

Mmm. A juicy scent. And it'd been some time since breakfast.

Got close get closer maybe?

Heh. They didn't call her Asagitatsu's Thief for nothing.

Step. Pause. Wriggle. Play big, blue, scaly rock. Step. And remember not to drool, no matter how

good it smelled.

...And maybe prissy elders might have called the heat-shimmers she'd bent around herself, to look more like rock and less like dragon, cheating. But this was *sneaking*. Not fighting. Anything was fair in sneaking.

Little farther, little more... looking this way? See only rock - oof!

The human-cub slid its hand along her side, looking puzzled. Screwed up its face to wail-

Eeep! Shh shh sleepycub shh warmsleep safe find Kingami cuddlewarm!

Odd blue eyes blinked. Small fingers poked azure scales. An image of *Kingami* fluttered back along that touch, with *warm* and *almost-uncle*.

Yes! Cuddlewarm Kingami go... ooo, smells good!

The human-cub thought so too, tugging her mane as it scampered over to where *Kingami* was lifting skewers of meat off the embers. Which gave *Ryuuko-hime* an even bolder idea.

Going to get yelled at.

But even the crankiest, most winter-achy dragon elder would admit it was worth it. Just to see how much like dragons humans really were.

...And to see the look on their faces.

A very large, warm, friendly rock, she nudged herself in at the end of the human-cub line weaving toward the meat. *Kingami* was taking it off the embers a skewer at a time, pushing bits off onto the cubs' flat rocklike *plates* with the small metal claw of a *fork*.

The last cub in front of her took its meat and headed for some of the other savories on a table that smelled of greens and fruits and tubers fried and salted. One hand still wrapped in cloth, *Kingami* was absently taking yet another skewer off the coals. Probably for the adult humans.

Delicately, she reached out with a whisker to touch his shoulder. *Kingami? One more hungrycub hmm?*

Sighing, he turned-

The look on his face was *priceless*.

Gently, very gently, she plucked the meat and steel from his grip. A swift move of her tongue bent heat away from her teeth; she walked on lava when she had to, this was nothing.

He still wasn't moving.

She smirked. And winked at him. *Mine!*

"Urk?" He gulped.

Ryuuko-hime Asagitatsu's Thief ha gotcha!

"Hey!"

Proper introductions made, *Ryuuko-hime* scampered off with her prize. Bounding and leaping, not

flying; humans couldn't bend fire, and you did not spill embers around hatchlings. It just wasn't right.

There was a *lot* of angry mouth-noise rising behind her.

Hee hee hee...

Up and *fly*. Circle, and... yes. There was a perch, in plain view, so she could taunt at will.

Landing, she took the metal bit in one claw, and slurped the meat off with teeth and tongue. Mmm, chomp, mmm...

Whooooaaah hoooooot!

Water. Water water *water*...

What felt like half a stream later, Ryuuko-hime sat back on her haunches, panting. And - reluctantly - smirked.

Heh. Heh heh heh. She tongued a scrap of spiced meat out from between her teeth. *Clever Kingami! Got me!*

Well. No *proper* thief would let that pass unchallenged.

She'd start by returning the skewer...

Ow. Tingzhe took the cup of tea without a murmur of protest. It wouldn't cure the headache, but it'd at least dull the stabbing knife in his head.

The short mind-tales don't hurt.

And how he knew that, the scholar in him shied away from thinking about. Shidan hadn't had time to give them short tales. He'd buried them under Ryuuko-hime and her brave human Kingami, under all the tangle of love and peril and spirits that had come with two lives striving to find common ground. Under the vast, heartbreaking mess that had been a people struck down by a plague they could not fight, and the desperate bargain with the spirits that had shattered them apart...

We were one people, once. Not kingdoms and tribes and conquerors. One people. Kin.

But dragons and bison were *not* kin, and sides had been taken. And while cooler heads might have prevailed against that feud, or against the sickness scything lives down... together, the strain had been too much to bear. One people had splintered into four, and not even a dragon-princess and her beloved could heal the hate. They could only build, and love, and remember.

Memory. Passed down from dragon to dragon, dragon-child, and kin. For... spirits, I can't even count the generations.

But he could feel them. Ghosts of countless lives of talon and wing and fire. Of learning human thoughts, human words, yet never quite *being* of the two-legs...

It was... a bit odd... being only human again.

More than odd, the professor thought, feeling the warmth of Meixiang's hand on his own. *Knowing* that warmth, now, for more than mere touch. It was a fire of the *mind*; constantly seeking,

constantly testing.

Are you prey? Enemy? Kin?

He could feel Meixiang reaching. But he couldn't answer. Not the way that long-lost firebender had been able to. Kingami could bend the energy within *himself*. All Tingzhe had was earth.

"I love you," Meixiang murmured.

Tingzhe smiled, comforted. And made certain Jia got her tea, even if she wanted to fuss and claim she didn't need it. There was so much to think about...

"Asagitatsu doesn't look like that anymore," Langxue said over the clinking cups.

And perhaps it was his imagination, but Tingzhe swore he felt the shock radiating from a handful of firebenders. "You know where Asagitatsu is?" Shidan said tautly.

"You just showed it to us," Langxue protested.

"I showed you the volcano as it was," Shidan said bluntly. "Hundreds of Avatars have lived and died. The mountains themselves have been scoured by wind and rain, or lifted by the fire within their hearts. The clans of Shirotona and Asagitatsu have not been allies for a long, long time. I know it is north. I know it is danger. I know it killed Yangchen, it *will* erupt again, and we dared not seek for it with the Fire Lords hunting dragons. I do *not* know where it lies."

"Typical," Langxue muttered. "Kills dozens of us, and the only one people talk about is the Avatar. Yangchen would bust *heads* about that, trust me. She knew the Avatar couldn't be everywhere-hey!"

Saoluan poked his shoulder again. "Big, blowing up fire-mountain," the warrior said frankly. "Where?"

"Why's it matter? We're not..." Langxue stared at Zuko, eyes narrowed in suspicion. "North. And maybe-airbenders. No. You *wouldn't*."

Zuko raised his brow. Unfolded a map of the northern continent, to lay it in front of all those seated. And pointed.

Ah, Tingzhe thought. *Indeed*.

"Are you *insane*?" Langxue yelped. "You were planning to put us on a *volcano*? That's-"

Iroh coughed into his fist. "Entirely common, in the Fire Nation." He paused. "Though I had thought the mount by the Northern Air Temple was unnamed. I pray it still is."

"I don't," Meixiang said gravely. "Remember the old rhyme, General."

"I know many," he stated. "Which one?"

Teruko cleared her throat. "With all due respect, General, you don't know this one. Or you wouldn't have to ask." She inclined her head at Meixiang; *go on*.

"Listen, and remember," Meixiang stated, gathering her kin with her eyes. "Volcanoes of earth kill. Those of water *destroy*. Listen, and learn the names of death. Kurokame. Akitori. Shirotona. Asagitatsu."

"Lake boil, burn stone
"Shirotora stands alone
"Five hundred years from rage to rage
"Tiger rattles at his cage.

"Lake boil, burn stone
"Asagitatsu stands alone
"A thousand years from rage to rage
"Dragon rattles at her cage."

Silence. Tingzhe gripped her fingers tightly.

"Every five centuries, more or less, Shirotora wishes very much to explode," Shidan said into the stunned hush. "It is what saved Byakko in Sozin's time, and saves us to this day. If we keep to ourselves some children who may be firebenders, if we train them in our ways and not the Fire Lord's schools - Shirotora is deadly, and he will kill, unless coaxed otherwise." He paused. "Kurokame waits six thousand years; Akitori, half that long. Both are beyond the lands of men, safe-kept by dragons who wish nothing to do with humankind. Only Asagitatsu remains, once held by Makoto's blood." Clawed fingers clenched. "If Asagitatsu slew Avatar Yangchen, and has since kept silent... she is a hundred years overdue."

"If," Iroh said firmly. "We cannot be sure."

"Yes," Tingzhe said, startling himself. "I believe we can."

Well. He was used to eyes on him in the lecture hall. This was different.

Tingzhe straightened his shoulders, and nodded, just as if he were about to instruct a class. "Shidan's... tale, tells us of both kinds of volcanoes. Those of earth have limited effects. The ash..." Unconsciously he rubbed his fingers together, remembering the *feel* of unseen bits of glass in soot. "The ash can travel miles, yes. A few days' ride, likely." He paused. "There is no volcano a few days from Ba Sing Se."

Ah. Undivided attention. If only his pupils had been as rapt.

"There are two layers I can be sure of," Tingzhe went on. "Very old, very deep, and in every land I have ever dug in. The elder marks about two thousand years ago. The younger... was eleven hundred years ago. Almost exactly." He swallowed dryly. "Ba Sing Se has records of the blackened sky, the fall of ash; the walking dead from the north, who had breathed ash and drowned on dry land. Avatar Yangchen's death brought horror, and fear. No nation dared attack another. There was nothing to spare to attack *with*. The spirits' only blessing was that it was winter. Had that ash fallen a few months earlier or later, on the crops..." He shook his head.

"We can't do this," Min said, stunned.

Tingzhe fought not to raise an eyebrow, and eyed his daughters when they might have leapt to protest. Min had a point.

"He's right," Langxue said shakily. "*Yangchen* couldn't get Asagitatsu to back down. All of us together couldn't! Sure, we were holding off Subodei - but there were *dozens* of us, and you've only got two yāorén here-

"Three," Shirong put in.

"Because one more makes *so* much of a difference," Langxue said sarcastically. He stood. "Make

another plan. Turn this ship around. We can't win this!"

"We have to." Still seated, Zuko tapped the map once, stark and deadly. "Look."

"There's *nothing* on that map that makes *suicide*-"

"*Look.*"

Langxue looked; at the cove, at the marked volcano, at the symbol of the ancient temple. And rubbed what had to be a worse headache than Tingzhe's. "They'll die if they stay. We'll have to get them out, too."

Zuko glanced at him. Moved his finger west-northwest, to what had to be a very chill harbor indeed. "That's where the fleet went down."

An awful victory, yes, Tingzhe thought. But I don't see-

And then he did, horribly, Shidan's gifted memories of Koh and dragons and the Face-Stealer's victims reeling through his head like a nightmare.

"The Face-Stealer holds the drowned dead," Langxue got out, pale. "Tui and La, protect us."

"They're already busy protecting their own," Amaya told him. "If the Avatar noticed nothing amiss after the Ocean walked - they are protecting the Northern Water Tribe." She traced her own finger over the map. "Tug the currents *here*, strongly, and no wind from Asagitatsu would reach them. That is where they will spend their power." Blue eyes swept over them all. "We have our own histories, chanted and written. The year Avatar Kuruk was born, the southern sky grew black. You could hear a roaring, as of a wounded snow-beast, that went on and on for days. But it did not touch us."

"They're not going to be that lucky this time," Zuko muttered. Raised his gaze, and his voice, as all eyes went to him. "Not with all that death in the water. Right there, where the Face-Stealer can use it! And he *will*. People are going to die. Half the world is going to die! We have to go. We have to stop it!"

"The Avatar," Iroh began.

Zuko shot to his feet. "Asagitatsu *eats* Avatars, Uncle! Aang's young, he doesn't know fire, and *she* *will* *kill* *him*. That's Koh's plan! It's been his plan all along!"

Iroh rose, matching the angry gaze with his steadiness. "Explain, nephew."

"You can't see it?" Zuko waved at the map. "How can you not see it? Plot, lethal, twisted, walk right into it if you're *lucky* - it's right there!"

"We have not all had the benefit of your sister's devoted attentions," Iroh said dryly. "What do you see?"

"A hundred years," Zuko bit out. "Where would the Elders have sent Aang to learn water? Where did he go?" He pointed toward the northern ice. "Aang's got the curiosity of a cat-owl and the survival sense of a *gnat*. If he saw a mountain smoking, what do you think he'd do? What *did* he do, at the Wu Shan volcano? Run like a sane person? No! He tried to *stop* it! And walls and trenches and blowing air around might stop lava, but what Asagitatsu's going to throw at him?" Zuko's hands clenched, fire blazing for a heartbeat.

"You mean, what she's going to throw at *us*," Shirong managed.

"Not without warning," Shidan said thoughtfully. "It takes months for a water volcano to ready itself to erupt." He nodded toward the mark of the Northern Air Temple. "Which is likely why we are all still breathing now. Aang was not in the north long enough. Not nearly as long as he should have been, to truly learn water."

"Because he ran off," Zuko said, half to himself. "He went south and got himself frozen. And Katara learned water up there instead. Blind, dumb luck." He let out a breath. "Shidan's right. Asagitatsu's not going to blow yet. Not until late summer. *Harvest*." He smirked, cold and angry. "This time, Koh wants to be sure."

Tingzhe held his family tightly, horrors out of history sending ice down his spine. Ash across the fields, destroying the crops. Ash in the lakes, choking the fish. Ash filling lungs, with no bending healers to save those choking on their own blood.

Guanyin. Agni. Help us all.

"And you think we can stop him." Shirong sounded too stunned to disbelieve.

"Yes."

Fear and strength and pure will, beating back the dark. Tingzhe remembered to breathe.

Shirong nodded, and spread empty hands. "How?"

How indeed, Tingzhe wondered, caught between terror and amazement. If Asagitatsu could kill Avatars-!

"Asagitatsu is bound to Makoto's blood," Zuko said firmly. And swallowed. "Makoto was Fire Lady Tejina. Sozin's wife."

Mother of Azulon, the mind of a scholar filled in, as Tingzhe tried not to sputter. *Grandmother of Iroh, and Fire Lord Ozai...*

Spirits and little fishes. They had *Makoto's children*.

"It should let us get close enough to talk," Zuko went on. "If she's willing to hear us out, if she'll let us soothe the magma down... We don't have enough firebenders, I know that. We don't have enough training in volcanoes, even if we did. But we have earthbenders. We have waterbenders! It's the *water* in the magma that kills people! If we can open vents, bend it out, take the pressure off-!"

Iroh regarded his nephew thoughtfully. Turned his glance on Shidan.

"It is possible," the dragon said, reluctantly. "If Asagitatsu is willing to be persuaded. It *might* work. But the risk-"

"Is worth it." Zuko's eyes seemed to devour the map, before he gave them a glance that should have seared the very air with its fierceness. "If we win this, we win it all."

Shirong eyed the map. And Zuko. And the map again. "No," he said in disbelief.

"Yes!" Teruko was grinning ear to ear, pounding a fist on her thigh. "Oh, yes, *sir*! I *knew* you had a plan!"

Shidan looked amused, Tingzhe judged, and almost as grimly delighted. And Iroh...

The general, Tingzhe reflected, looked as if he'd been asked to swallow a bowl full of molly-guppies. Alive.

Why?

"Prince Zuko." Iroh's voice was full of foreboding. "You will not try to *blackmail* the Avatar."

"Yes," Zuko said with that same fierce smile. "I will."

Tingzhe's jaw dropped. *Oma and Shu. Is he mad?*

Iroh was shaking his head, as if he couldn't believe his own ears. "Of all the foolish things you have done in your sixteen years-

"The Avatar believes in four nations. Four separate peoples." Zuko looked at his uncle. "These are my people, Uncle. I will protect them."

Iroh gave him a disbelieving glance. "Surely, Aang would never be so unkind-"

"He is not *kind*, Uncle! I know him!" Zuko held out empty hands, pleading. "Yes, it's crazy. Yes, I could get killed. Worse than killed. Yes, I'm not taking anyone to Asagitatsu who doesn't volunteer. Byakko will help hide people if we have to. Please, just *listen*."

Iroh regarded him for a long moment. Sighed, and inclined his head. "Tell me, then. Tell me why you, who have healed this boy, cannot trust he will respect that obligation to those under your care."

"Because he's not just a boy, Uncle," Zuko said soberly. "He's the Avatar. He doesn't have obligations. Not to anyone human."

Iroh frowned.

"Kuzon knew him," Zuko insisted. "Grandfather and I - discussed it. Aang is a lot of things, Uncle. He's brave. He's smart, when he takes the time to think instead of chasing butterflies. He wants to do the right thing, whenever he thinks he knows what the right thing is. And the right thing isn't *kind*. The right thing, what *he's* been taught is right, is that the four nations have to be *separate*. Always. Air Nomad, Uncle. No family. No land. No clan. They give up their own children because it's *the right thing to do*." Zuko swallowed. "He won't even be angry about it. He'll just be upset. Confused. Because we're doing something so horribly wrong. And good people don't do bad things. That's not the way his world works. So we're not good people. We *can't* be. And if we're not..." He waved toward the map, and the arctic harbor that had swallowed a fleet.

"If you are wrong," Iroh began.

"If I'm wrong, he never has to know!" Zuko waved his hands. "We're just a bunch of people living on a volcano. Like Byakko. Like Wu Shan. He'll just think we're crazy. He *already* thinks I'm crazy. He probably won't even *notice*." He met Iroh's gaze. "Not one path to victory, Uncle. All paths. You taught me that."

"Three years chasing the Avatar, and now he listens," Iroh said dryly. Stroked his beard. "Strategically, there is merit to your plan. But what does your heart say, nephew?"

Zuko's shoulders slumped. Straightened, as the young man faced the general, unflinching. "My

heart says my people are going to die, Uncle."

Iroh stiffened.

"My heart says I know Aang. That he's nice, but not kind. That he's so nice, so brave, so sure he has to do what's right, he'll lead the *good* guys against the *bad* guys. Or everybody else, against the Fire Nation. And because he's so nice, he'll believe they *are* the good guys, as long as they're beating the bad guys. No matter what they do to beat the bad guys." Zuko swallowed dryly. "My heart says, there are widows and orphans - *thousands* of widows and orphans - who are screaming in their sleep, torn by nightmares of the Siege of the North. Of their mothers and fathers who aren't ever coming home. And if - *when* - the Avatar comes to the Fire Nation..."

"They'll kill themselves trying to get to him," Teruko said soberly. "You know they will, sir. I would."

"More to the point, they'll kill anyone between them and the Avatar. And they'll be *creative*." Shirong winced. "Given the Earth Army's standing orders on firebenders who invent new techniques..." He had to pause. "From personal experience... once you start doing things as black as attacking children... it's very hard to stop."

I don't want to hear this, Tingzhe thought, aching inside. *I don't want to imagine it*.

But he could, Oma and Shu help him. He could.

"Yet if there is a place for those bereft to vent their rage in action," Shidan said thoughtfully, "where they can mourn their dead, and feed the flames to beckon lost ghosts home - we will at one stroke drain away that tainted power the Face-Stealer seeks, and save our people's lives." At startled looks, he smiled. "We have practice in extracting people from the Fire Nation. A very great deal of practice."

"Now that," Mai mused, "sounds interesting."

Shidan's brows climbed; he chuckled. "I would be most grateful for the assistance, Lady Mai. You may have observed that certain gifts run in my family." A hint of gleaming teeth. "Diplomacy is not one of them."

Mai's answering smirk was thin, but there. "I noticed."

"You want to go back there?" Min blurted out. "Why?"

Tingzhe kept manfully silent, even when he wanted to roll his eyes. Ah, to be a young man, blithely confident that girls wanted what *you* wanted. And never, ever had their own agenda.

"I left a friend with Azula," Mai said simply. "I didn't have a choice then. Now, I do."

"But who's going to teach us?" Suyin asked, stricken.

"Your mother knows knives. So do the marines. And your cousin." Mai nodded toward Zuko. "He doesn't show off, but he's not bad." Her gold eyes were set, unflinching. "But they can't step back on shore in the Fire Nation without risking a death sentence. I can."

"Death?" Min gulped.

"That's what exile means." Zuko's voice wasn't quite calm. "Cross into Fire Nation waters, anyone can kill you." He smirked a little. "Though Zhao just tried to catch me. Until the Avatar pulled a

temple down on his head."

"Avatar Roku," Iroh reminded him. "Not Avatar Aang."

Zuko took a breath, let it steam out. "I'm not going to argue about this again," he said quietly. "You think it's not his fault. I think it is. Fine. That doesn't change the result." He pointed to the map. "And neither will taking Asagitsatsu. We can *win* this, Uncle. We can give our people a home. We can give Earth King Kuei, our *ally*, the buffer he wants between Earth and Air. We can make sure Ji the Mechanist never builds another weapon for the Fire Lord. And even if we can't do *any* of that," one hand closed in a fist, "we'll *know* when the mountain's going to blow. We can send out warnings. If there's early crops, if the earthbenders can get them underground before the ash falls..."

"There are many defenses against ashfall, and the glass knives of tainted air," Shidan said soberly. "None are perfect. But we will see that knowledge spread as far as we can." He grinned dryly. "After all, if the Earth King gives an order, his people *might* obey."

Shirong was studying the map, face still pale. "You realize, if this thing goes off, the Fire Lord's not going to need an army to take the Earth Kingdom. All he has to do... is wait."

"If he were willing to wait, Fire Lord Azulon would still be alive." Zuko shook his head. "One problem at a time. Volcano first. Get our people sheltered. Get those ghosts called home. *Then* we worry about my father."

Chapter End Notes

I have a confession to make. I grew up on, among other books, Heinlein SF. One of his themes? "Ignorance is its own death penalty." Put together that, with what we see of Sozin, Roku, and Aang. Oh boy.

Comets have often been blamed for causing eruptions.

Also, I've run across stuff on Koh that ties him to the World-Serpent of Norse myth, Jormungandr, and to Nidhoggr, who eats the roots of the World Tree Yggdrasil and corpses, and controlled said bodies at the end of the world. Gnawing the roots of the tree holding up the world sounds bad... but according to the myths, without his gnawing, the roots would outgrow the world's boundaries. Which would be Very Bad.

Embers Wild Mass Guessing page entry, "Vathara is reading this page right now laughing evilly": Confirmed. And yes, I do read it to double-check my plot!

Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

A disturbing subject will be mentioned later in this chapter. It will not be described in detail, but one of the realities of war will come up. Nightwish's "I Wish I Had An Angel" would not be inappropriate background music.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

I miss my hat, Shirong thought, standing with Saoluan as close to one of the trebuchets as they could manage without sinking into the steel. There *seemed* to be a lot of open space on the rear decks of *Suzuran*. And there was. For firebending. Or even earthbending.

Whoosh! Thunk.

"Ow..."

Airbending, not so much, Shirong thought ruefully, watching Zuko pick himself up off the deck yet again, as Langxue winced.

"I guess I missed one of the twists?" the Kyoshi *yāorén* admitted.

"Not sure." Zuko got his breath back, and stalked over to where iron bars were holding down a scroll against the ship's wind... and any other breezes. "Let's take another look."

"You're not sure?"

"Stand there and dodge a few fireblasts," Zuko said dryly. "Then I can bring you a firebending scroll, and you can tell me how the form works."

"All right, I get the point..."

"Do you still think he's crazy?" Shidan said, almost in Shirong's ear.

"Gah," Shirong managed, earth-gloves ready to fire even as Saoluan's blade *snicked* loose in its sheath. "Do you have to do that?"

Pale gold blinked lazily at them both. "Do you wish an honest answer, Agent Shirong?"

"It's a dragon thing," Saoluan confided, securing her sword once more. "I think he can't sleep nights until he's startled something out of its skin."

"You are very close to right," the dragon smiled. "We are hunters. We *test* that which may be prey. We find it... amusing." He shrugged. "Walking among inattentive humans... it is much like holding a long feather, and coming across a sleeping cat. Irresistible."

"Resist," Shirong suggested dryly.

"When I've so short a time left to walk among you before we reach the harbor?" The dragon's smile sobered. "Zuko and Iroh know this, but I will tell you directly. Byakko *will* be sending aid. Yes, it

will draw attention to us. But if my lady reports we have plausible word of a restless volcano, our firebenders will not be detained. The Fire Lord is arrogant and cruel. He is not foolish. No one can reign over ashes."

"I wasn't really thinking about that," Shirong confessed. He'd been trying not to think of it, more accurately. "I was listening to some of the farmers talk, while people were deciding who'd go with the prince. And who'd split off with your ship and Captain Donghai's associates." That had gone a lot more quickly and calmly than he ever would have dreamed. *We're going to live on a volcano* really *did* seem to be no cause for concern. *It's cranky and potentially about to blow* had given some pause, but no more than one in four had found Asagitatsu too much to face.

The Fire Nation is crazy. Shirong smiled ruefully. *And here I am, following.* "It just struck me that, well, I've never heard of some of the crops they were discussing. Oca? Mashua? Achira? Oogami nuts?" He gave Shidan an arch look. "Facing off with the Fire Army is one thing. Threatening a man's dinner menu? There could be consequences."

"If you've had glass noodles, you've had achira," the dragon stated. "I imagine our refugees smuggled them in as flower seeds, when your officials asked. Just as they would have with the others. Particularly oogami nuts; you've likely seen tall sprays of sky-blue flowers scattered all over the fields to strengthen them. They aren't nuts, any more than peanuts are. You probably won't notice the difference in a sauce unless you see them grinding the seeds ahead of time." He paused. "Though they can be a bit poisonous, if you get an inexperienced cook..."

Shirong stifled a groan. "Can't you people live without something trying to kill you?"

"Not easily." Shidan half-closed his eyes, thinking. "I imagine there will be difficulties. The grains we grow aren't truly *grains*, not as you know them. Teosinte-buckwheat, oca, the others... Much of what we tend either stores itself underground, or has seeds that can survive and sprout after being buried in ash. Wheat is a thing for sweet tarts, and other treats. It's not fond of high mountains or the seashore. And there's little of Byakko that is not one or the other."

"That's going to make things tricky," Shirong muttered.

"Food?" Saoluan glanced at them as if they were both nuts, even as she kept most of her attention on the pair arguing over airbending forms. "As long as we have enough to eat, who cares?"

"This from the young lady who tried to clean my galley out of river shrimp?" Shidan *hmphed*.

"Food is morale, Warrior Saoluan. Our friend is right to be concerned."

"That wasn't exactly what I was thinking," Shirong said thoughtfully. "Farmers and fishers, they're the backbone of Ba Sing Se. How your treat the land affects the people, and the spirits. Who affect the land themselves. Earth farmers are about stability. Building the soil deeper and richer. While you burn what's left in the fields." He spread an empty hand. "We're going to have to figure something out. Spirits don't like being confused."

"We're heading north," Saoluan pointed out. "It's going to be hard to pick out spirits being upset when the whole *ocean* wants humans to keel over and die."

"Point." Shirong rubbed at a ghost of threatening headache. "This is insane."

"Oh, you haven't heard insane yet." Saoluan was watching the dragon, poised and ready. "Think about it. Makoto's still out there. She's been out there a *thousand years*. And no one's acting like she'll save us a headache by keeling over and dying. Meaning dragons live *longer*."

Shirong looked between Shidan's stillness, and the swordswoman's tense stance. "And?"

"So somebody knew where Asagitatsu was a thousand years ago," Saoluan said tautly. "How do you lose a whole mountain?"

...*Oh.*

Shidan inclined his head. "It is not an easy thing to speak of. Zuko knows, though I will remind him of the details... In short, one loses it by interference. From Makoto, and Wan Shi Tong."

Shirong traded a look with the Warrior. "Explain."

"Words limit one so," the dragon sighed. "And yet, they give your people a safety mine have never had. Save with Kingami, at the beginning; tales say he did find a way to record mind-tales, long ago... words, Agent Shirong. Brush and ink. Frail conduits, to carry truth and memory into the future. Yet chance and hope may spare them, to be found again even when all of the clan who wrote them are dead and ash."

That doesn't make sense-

Suddenly, horribly, it did. "Mind-tales... need a mind to carry them," Shirong realized. "Oma and Shu. She didn't."

"She did." Shidan did not flinch. "For Wan Shi Tong, she was the heir to Asagitatsu, with claim to all knowledge of it; she granted it freely to him, if only he would steal it from all others. That, for human knowledge. For that of dragons... with the Face-Stealer's help, she had the strength to bind water spirits like the haima-jiao. They are weaker than a dragon armed, *less* than we - but a swarm of them against one? Water against fire? One by one, she lured us away to death. Even Agni's children cannot return from drowning to warn of danger. Not if another power binds their souls... and none of their clan survives to light a beckoning pyre." Pale gold looked away. "Her clan did not survive Yangchen's death. So there was no one to warn us what she might be. None to warn that she was not the anguished last survivor, alive only because of a freak windstorm to ground her far from home. It took us centuries to suspect..."

The Dai Li drew a deep breath, reflexively hardening his will against that cold, aching despair. A dragon might be flesh and blood, but that power *felt* like a spirit.

"You," Saoluan blurted out. "It was you, wasn't it? You figured it out. This is *personal*."

"You have no idea," Shidan breathed. "Father of Fire... I was only a cub. Barely a few decades past a tumbling hatchling. And our clan had so very many hatchlings." He looked away, into nightmare. "She forgot to count us all."

Shirong felt his heart beating hard, and remembered to breathe. "You went after her."

"I was a child. And a dragon. We can be very, *very* stupid," Shidan said dryly.

The agent thought of that, and Zuko, and night on the shores of Lake Laogai. And shrugged. *No comment.*

"But I was also lucky," the dragon went on. "Though I did not think so, not then. The yamabushi found me."

"Who?" Shirong asked, puzzled. *But Saoluan's not?* he wondered, seeing her frown. *Huh.*

"The mountain sages," the dragon elaborated. "Wind brought them whispers, that great evil walked our slopes. That Shirotora and every creature Byakko sheltered was in danger. They listened." He smiled, bittersweet. "Master Ikkyuu had come for the ritual threatening a few days early; he liked to be unpredictable. His sages and students were meant to be a show of force to an entire clan. They were more than enough to capture me, and rescue what few hatchlings and eggs survived. And sit on me, until Byakko's lord could calm me enough to learn the tale."

Shirong could almost see the dripping slaughter. Shivered, thrusting his own memories of deadly water away.

"Ritual threatening?" Saoluan asked, dazed.

"To establish the boundaries." The dragon shook himself, obviously trying to push the past back into dark memory. "You go to the border, as your neighbor does, and there is much stalking and hissing and baring of teeth." He rubbed his head. "And someone generally miscalculates a hair, and gets their skull bruised. But everyone is armed - the yamabushi *never* insult us by coming unarmed - so no one gets hurt."

"Unarmed is an insult?" Shirong said warily. It *felt* true, no matter how crazy it sounded.

"You are so pitiful an enemy, I don't even need claws to deal with you," Shidan *hmp*ed.

"Ah."

"The yamabushi saved what was left of my clan," Shidan said quietly. "Kuzon and I tried to save their kin from Sozin-" He stopped, and shook his head. "Shirotora would have saved us from Makoto, had we but known. The White Tiger may be no match for the Face-Stealer's power, but Byakko is *his*. Yet we saw a fair face, and felt fair thoughts... and invited her in."

"And once she had permission to enter your home, she could call in anything." The Dai Li looked the dragon in the eye, knowing that pain. "It's not your fault."

"I know that!" Smoke curled from the dragon's breath.

Stand your ground, Shirong told his shaking knees. *Don't run!*

"I know that," Shidan repeated, white-knuckled and pale. "And I know we were fortunate. She did not know how many of us walked among humans. We did not lose *every* adult. Only... most." A bitter laugh. "And that was not the worst."

Oh. Wonderful.

"We were so wounded," Shidan said simply. "So desperate to wall out the world and say, *leave us to our grief*." He looked down. "We knew of the pirates. But they knew better than to lurk near Byakko. So we thought them... not our concern."

"The pirates?" Shirong repeated, confused. He was getting in some practice with Tingzhe, yes - but trying to talk to someone who casually mentioned a *thousand years* of history still left him a bit dizzy. *No. He can't mean-* "Kyoshi's pirates?" Which was the wrong way around, entirely, but-

White hair dipped. "The same." A bitter smile. "So you see, you are wrong. It *is* our fault. Byakko has ever warded the Fire Nation from harm. That time, we failed. We could not look beyond our own pain... and so Avatar Kyoshi had no answer for hers." A gusting sigh. "And so. An Avatar's rage. A Fire Lord. And, eventually, war."

For a moment, Shirong had to bury his head in his hands. One thing to hear Zuko outline bits of the Face-Stealer's millennia-old plan to destroy humanity. Quite another, to hear it from someone who had been *there*.

"Makoto's fault," Saoluan said bluntly.

"Asagitatsu and Byakko were allies, once. And kin." Shidan's eyes were still distant. "So. For over three centuries, Byakko has been the raven-wolf to her sea serpent. Any one of us she catches, she will kill. But we could warn, and hunt her, and drive her off in numbers... and so she persuaded Sozin to slay us all."

"You hold Byakko," Saoluan snorted. "He'd have cut his own throat."

"Never underestimate what love will drive a man to do." A bitter smile. "He almost did."

"But why?" the swordswoman asked. "Why is she doing this?"

"If you encounter her, you may ask," Shidan said, coldly precise. "I do not *care*."

Something in the way he'd said that... "You'd be too busy staying alive," Shirong stated. "If she was a Fire Lady, that means... oh, bury me somewhere cold. She's that strong?"

"The match of a Fire Lord in strength," Shidan nodded. "Or more. Do not *fight* her, Agent Shirong. *Kill* her. Or flee." His whiskers twitched. "And be warned. Sozin is long dead, and Fire Lady Tejjina with him. But by night, with the moon full or dark... she may walk in other forms."

Oh. Lovely. "We're all insane," Shirong muttered.

"Do you think so?" Shidan looked honestly interested. As if the answer weren't a potential insult to all his clan.

Dragons want the truth, the agent reminded himself. "Yes. And no."

"Well, that clears everything up," Saoluan muttered.

"Forget Makoto." *Oh, I wish I could.* "She'll go after us, or she won't. If she does, we'll... have to deal with it. She wants us dead? A lot of people do. At least that's simple."

Shidan raised a brow, listening.

"What's complicated is the human mess," the agent went on. "The prince of the Fire Nation is trusting the Earth King not to betray him, and the Earth King is trusting Prince Zuko to delay and divide the Fire Lord's forces. It should be crazy. Any of the Council of Five would call it crazy. But it isn't." He stared toward the west, where tree-shrouded banks still hid the river mouth of the harbor. "A year ago, a year to come - who knows what will happen. Here and now? I know Kuei. And Zuko. This might work." He glanced at the dragon. "You think of earth as stable, unyielding. Bound in tradition. And we are. But we're also the slope of the mountain, waiting for that one stray pebble to start the avalanche. That one moment when everything changes. Forever."

Shidan inclined his head, a gracious acceptance of offered truth. "And is this such a moment?"

"You've been throwing pebbles as hard as you can," Shirong said dryly. "Just what did you slip into our heads, under the cover of a story?"

The dragon smirked. "Very good."

"Good?" Saoluan echoed in disbelief. "You - you - what did you *do*?"

"I gave you tools," Shidan stated. "Tools, and templates. Those created by Ryuuko-hime, in ages past, so her bond with Kingami might be fruitful, and bring the joy of children to the clan. The same shapings used by her children, and her children's children, and all of dragon-kind who walk among humans. It is not easy for us to bear young, even with those touched by fire. That the Wen clan has four, when Tingzhe is Earth alone... you have no idea how rare a blessing that is." A shrug, red and dark blue silk shimmering in the afternoon sun. "Most of you will never have the power or the need to shape a mate. But the knowledge is part of the story. And yāorén *do* have that power." He cast a glance at Saoluan. "And in the past, centuries ago... yāorén sometimes used that knowledge for other purposes."

The warrior's eyes narrowed, suspicious.

"It is nothing that would harm you," Shidan said gravely. "But those who keep company with yāorén often find themselves beset by unfriendly spirits. And those with a touch of dragon's blood, born or gifted, tend to be more able to hold their own. And strike back." He smiled at Shirong, eyes terribly gentle. "After all, young man... how did you think you survived a spider's embrace?"

No.

He didn't want to move. He didn't want to think.

"I know one of our kin when I touch them," the dragon said softly. "I do not know how, or where, or how long ago. But if you have need of a home, if all else is lost... Byakko would shelter you." He let out a sigh. "Yet you were born to Earth. And my grandson needs that heritage of you, as well. His hopes rest on nurturing three elements among you all, so Air itself is challenged, and rises to defend its mountains once more." He shook his head. "Dragons are thieves, Agent Shirong. Of lives. Of gold. Of hearts. My own heart cries out to steal you all away. To forge you into Fire, that your hope and determination might heal my poor, ravaged nation." A bittersweet half-smile. "But I am one of Agni's children, and I know my duty. Be Earth. *Be Dai Li*. Remember all you love of Ba Sing Se, and make it anew."

Shirong raised an eyebrow, trying not to let lingering shock show on his face. "You want me to keep Zuko... grounded."

"Yes." Shidan turned to Saoluan. "And he will need your help, as well as Amaya's. She knows Water living among Earth. You know it living *with* Earth. He will need them both."

Saoluan gave him a measuring look. "You scare me," she said at last.

Teeth glinted. "I frighten many folk, Warrior."

"Oh, it's not the teeth," the swordswoman said dryly. "Or the sword. Or the fire. Or even the dragon." She let out a low whistle. "You. And the prince. You just - you don't *stop*. You pick what you think is right, you plan it - and then you *go*." Her voice dropped. "It's going to kill your people. You know that, right? You don't stop. And the Avatar has to stop you."

"I know." Shidan was just as quiet. "But to be otherwise, would not be Fire."

"And if you lose yourself, you lose everything," Shirong agreed bleakly. "Some things are worth dying for."

Saoluan eyed them both. Then, reluctantly, looked at her little brother, and the sudden snowfall around him as wind and water-shaping went awry. "Yeah."

"Snow." Stepping carefully across white-dusted metal, Zuko glared at the world. "Well, that's just-"

Passing by, Lieutenant Sadao's red and black uniform suddenly blurred. "Eyagh!"

Thud.

"Um." Shirong eyed the fallen lieutenant, and the sudden waft of smoke from the bridge. "You think-?"

"Strategic retreat," Shidan advised.

Jee's snarl could have been heard all the way to the shore. *"Why is there snow on my ship?"*

"We're what?" Aang blurted out. The sun was shining, Appa was grumbling under his covering sheet that the wind off the harbor was just asking to be flown on, and Sokka - even wearing a Fire Navy uniform - was grinning. He couldn't have said what Aang thought he'd just said.

"We're chasing Zuko," Sokka repeated. "Gotta say, I kind of like the irony."

"But - but -"

"Aang." Helmet concealing his blue-beaded braid, Hakoda looked down on him, serious. "We've only gotten this far because no one's looked too hard at where this ship is or what orders it's following. So far, 'in pursuit of *Suzuran*' covers a lot of 'not following proper procedure'. If we're lucky, it'll get us through this port. From here - well. We'll have to see which way he went."

"What makes it even better? Zuko knows all about hawks." Sokka rubbed his hands together, savoring it. "So nobody thinks twice about why we ask *people* where he's going, instead of taking reports."

"You think this is funny," Aang said, incredulous.

"You don't?"

"People are going to think we're trying to catch him!" Aang protested.

"Right. That's kind of the idea," Sokka agreed.

Aang rubbed at his eyes, willing the world to make sense. Maybe he was having a bad dream? "What if we *do* catch him?"

Sokka blinked. "Um..."

"Better think about it, Sokka." Metal shivered as Toph worked her toes against it, wrapped in a red cloak as she climbed out of the hold. "Aang doesn't think it's funny? I bet Zuko wouldn't think it's funny either. I know Katara doesn't."

"But she knows the whole plan!" Sokka protested. "She was laughing about it!"

"Less laughing. More, *mwah-ha-hah, I get to drown them all if they look at us funny.*" Toph shook her head. "I've kind of got her distracted down by the waterline, seeing if she can feel the harbor like I do dirt. So could you think about this?"

"Come on, it's not like we're really going to catch... Dad?" Sokka suddenly looked worried.

"If we were only following *Suzuran*, I doubt we would," Hakoda said gravely. "She may be a freighter, but Captain Jee knows how to handle her. Which is more than we can say for this ship." He frowned. "But the Ba Sing Se ships are slowing them down. They need the wind."

And no one else could bend it. "So what's the plan?" Aang asked.

"Ah. Plan." Sokka grinned, just a little nervous, and scrambled for some paper and ink. "Let me get back to you."

"You do that. I'll go head off watery death." Stepping back onto the ladder as if it were dry land, Toph zipped down out of sight.

Aang rolled his eyes, and reluctantly walked away. Watery death? Sheesh. Toph acted like Katara could be scary.

...And, well, she *could* - but just in an "uh-oh, supper's going to taste *awful* tonight" kind of way. She wasn't *scary* scary. Not like the spirits were. Not like the Avatar Spirit was.

"You don't like Shaman Tao's lessons."

Ack. He'd forgotten Hakoda was still there. Following him. Toward his lesson with Tao, which he really, *really* didn't want to go to. "He's a good teacher," Aang stalled. "I need to know this stuff." *I guess.*

"That's not what I said." Hakoda gave him a concerned look. "Aang. There are many things a young man has to learn that aren't easy to bear. Which is why he should always have a father or a grandfather to go to. Or an elder monk, for a nomad." He smiled, rough and kind. "I'm no monk. But if something is upsetting you, I'm here."

Aang swallowed. "It just - it doesn't seem right," he said in a rush. "The spirits are supposed to be the good guys. The Moon and Ocean are! And Hei Bai was just upset. But Boots is a pest, and that sea-spider tried to *eat* Toph, and Amaya said there was an evil spirit in Ba Sing Se I didn't know about, and - it's just wrong! Spirits aren't evil!"

There. He'd said it. And now Chief Hakoda was going to laugh at him. Or worse, frown and tell him how wrong he was.

"Hmm. I haven't had this talk in a while," Hakoda mused. "Usually, children ask this the first time they're old enough to understand a bad birth..." He stopped, and looked at Aang. "But you didn't grow up with mothers-to-be in your temple, did you?"

"That was a nun thing," Aang said, for what had to be the thousandth time. "How can a birth be bad? Bringing life into the world is a good thing."

Hakoda looked startled. "Katara told me you dealt with a birth outside Ba Sing Se."

"Well, yeah," Aang said, wondering what he was getting at. "She seemed really worried. So did Sokka, before Hope was born. But they didn't say why."

"Of course not!" Hakoda looked shocked. "You don't mention the blood-drinkers and breath-stealers when a woman might be *about* to become a mother... you have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"No!" Aang tried not to glare. "And I wish somebody would just tell me!"

The Water Tribe chief looked as though he'd rather be handling live scorpion-vipers. "Let's find a quiet corner. I think Tao can wait."

An hour later in Hakoda's cabin, Aang was clutching his staff like a lifeline. "Spirits can... spirits will... *babies?*"

"Koala-otters eat kelp. Leopard-sharks eat penguins. And some spirits prey on us, if we don't make them offerings," Hakoda said plainly. "Sometimes even when we do. That's not evil, Aang. It's just what they are."

"But it's wrong!"

"Aang..." Helmet off, Hakoda spread open hands. "That's *life*."

"But..." Aang swallowed, and screwed up his courage. "But if it is... then why didn't Gyatso *tell* me?"

Hakoda was quiet, glancing down; so much like Sokka in one of his *thinking* moods, it hurt. "Aang," he said, very carefully, "if you hadn't been the Avatar, what would your life have been like? How would you have lived, growing up?" He smiled a little. "We have a lot of stories about what the Air Nomads were like. But you're the only one who can really tell us."

Because the others are gone. It hurt, like it always hurt, unless he was doing things to forget. But Aang bit his lip and thought about it, because at least Chief Hakoda was trying to help. Even if the things he talked about were scary. "I guess... I'd be like the other monks," Aang said at last.

"Maybe I'd work in the orchards. Or making gliders. Or cooking; Gyatso taught me how to make these *great* cakes..." He swallowed. "And when I was eighteen, we'd go see the nuns at the Spring Festival. And maybe when I was forty or so, the elders would say if I could train a student. And we'd travel, and maybe paint the temples if somebody dedicated a new room, and we'd always be trying to see if there was something neat new we could do with airbending..."

Huh. That was weird. There weren't any more words.

Hakoda shook his head, and held out his arms. "Come here."

"I miss them," Aang managed.

"I know," Hakoda said quietly, holding him close. "I miss Kya, too."

"I know I'm not supposed to - we're supposed to be detached, that's what Air is..."

"Maybe. But you're the Avatar, not just Air." Hakoda gave him a wry look. "I don't think it's wrong for you to miss them."

"But it h-hurts..."

"That's life, too," Hakoda said softly. "I'm sorry."

Hiding his face in cloth and armor, Aang sniffled. *Great. Now I look stupid.*

"All I can think," Hakoda went on, "is that Gyatso taught you what any young monk should know. And if that's how he grew up - I don't think it's his fault he didn't know how to teach you how the rest of the world lives." He tilted his head, inviting Aang to share the joke. "No teacher knows everything. Just ask my mother. 'Don't ask *me* about tracking tiger-seals. That's for hot-blooded young idiots out to lose a finger!'"

He sounded *just like* Gran-Gran. Aang couldn't help but giggle.

"It sounds to me," Hakoda said more soberly, "that you lived very safe lives in your temples. Very peaceful."

"Well, yeah," Aang said, pulling back a little. "We were monks. Peace was kind of what we were all about."

"The problem is," Hakoda said thoughtfully, "most of the world has never lived that way. Even before the war. I'm trying to imagine the life you lived myself. And I can't. Even though I'm one of the most peaceful chiefs we've ever had."

"Peaceful?" Aang tried to back up, without making it look like he was backing up. "You led all the tribesmen off to fight!"

"With the Fire Nation. Not with other Water villages," Hakoda said practically. "Sokka and Katara are far too young to remember, but before the Fire Nation began their raids, we had little ambushes every summer."

Aang recoiled. "But - why? You were all Water Tribe!"

"And we're all human," Hakoda answered. "We get angry at each other. We get jealous. Some people just want to fight. Or to show off for a pretty girl. Or - Tui and La, Aang, there's as many reasons as there are people. We're not monks. We fight. Hopefully for good reasons. Or what seem like good reasons; I'm sure even some of the men on this ship-" He cut himself off, and sighed. "Never mind. Tao's probably looking for you."

Deposited gently but firmly outside Hakoda's door, Aang blinked, startled.

What isn't he telling me?

Something's wrong, Dad had said. Find out what Tao's teaching him that we don't know about.

Easy for him to say, Katara thought, stepping carefully down the metal corridor. Sneaking around igloos for Gran-Gran to get an idea if people were feeling a little winter-crazy was one thing. Sneaking outside the door to Tao's cabin, where there'd be exactly no explanation they could give if Aang heard a noise and looked?

Good thing Toph had been willing to hear her out when she asked for help. Snow, Katara could sneak over without a sound. Steel? That took the earthbender's firm touch.

I just hope Sokka can keep Boots busy. Tao seems to know where spirits are.

Laying one hand against dark metal, Toph pulled with the other, like stretching a piece of seaweed gel. Slowly, carefully, until she had a taut, thinner layer, the better to poke holes in with a finger for both of them.

Putting her ear to the opening, Katara listened.

"So I believe part of your difficulty is in not recognizing there are different levels of spirits," Tao's voice came through. "You should learn of them all, but most are not powerful enough to merit the Avatar taking a direct hand."

Is he kidding? Katara thought, incredulous. *The Avatar-*

"But I'm supposed to be the bridge between humans and the spirits!" Aang protested. "That's what they told me in Senlin Village."

"The Hei Bai forest spirit is powerful, but a competent shaman should have been able to deal with it," Tao said firmly. "It's far beyond a kamuiy like Boots, even into the realm of a kami. But it is not a great spirit, that can think and reason much as humans can. Though never in the same way as humans do. Those few, those powers, are what we truly need the Avatar for."

"Great spirit?" Aang said doubtfully. "You mean, like Wan Shi Tong?"

"Did the owl tell you he was one?" Tao hmphed. "If he did, he lied. He is a very powerful kami, to be sure. But he is not one such as the Moon, or Ocean." A pause. "Or the Face-Stealer."

Katara shivered, and felt Toph touch her hand. They'd both heard Aang's story of the dreadful spirit he'd found going through the oasis. And Koh was supposed to be as powerful as the Moon? No way.

"I don't get it." She could hear the frown in Aang's voice. "If Koh's that powerful, why isn't he helping? I mean, I know he doesn't like the Avatar..."

"He doesn't like anyone human," Tao said, voice dry. "And I'll thank you not to use his true name so freely if you are not trying to get his attention."

"...Sorry." Aang sighed. "So why doesn't he like people?"

"Anyone who might have found the answer to that, didn't live to tell the tale."

"Well, that's no help," Aang exclaimed. "If we don't know what's wrong, how can we fix it?"

"You're assuming it's something humans can fix," Tao said pragmatically. "It may not be."

"It's got to be!"

"Does it? What if he doesn't like the sound of babies crying?" Tao countered. "There are lesser spirits who do not. And they will take drastic measures to restore what they think of as peace."

"...Yeah," Aang said quietly. "Chief Hakoda told me."

"Good. Though why didn't your mother-? Ah. Yes. Forgive me." Tao cleared his throat. "Sometimes the best way humans can be good neighbors to the spirits is to simply not draw their attention. Though as the Avatar, you always have the great spirits' attention. Whether they make it obvious or not."

"Okay," Aang said doubtfully. "So who are the great spirits?"

"You know of the Face-Stealer," Tao stated. "There are the Ocean and Moon, your people's Storm Lord, and Guanyin of the merciful earth with her deputies Oma and Shu."

"But they were humans," Aang objected.

"Were, yes. A very long time ago. They certainly aren't human spirits now."

Silence stretched out.

Predictably, Aang broke first. "Um. Aren't you missing one?"

"No."

Toph raised her eyebrows. Katara bit back a snicker.

"What about Agni?" Aang persisted.

"What *about* that creature?" Tao's voice was cold. "A true great spirit would never have let its people cross the boundaries set by the spirits at the beginning of time. Much less inflicted this war on us. Most of the Fire Nation doesn't even believe in spirits anymore. You saw that at the North Pole."

"Iroh does," Aang said firmly. "So does Zuko."

"Believing spirits exist is *not* the same as having faith in them," Tao stated. "For as long as the legends remember, the Fire Nation has had no faith in spirits. They build machines. They conquer the sea with ships of steel, rather than bow to the Ocean's tribute of storm-lost ships." He *hmp*hed. "They don't even write their prayers such that the spirits can understand them."

"...You don't like the Fire Nation, do you?" Aang said warily.

Katara rolled her eyes. Toph frowned, pressing her hand against metal to pick up vibrations.

"I have over a century of reasons, young man," Tao said tartly. "I would not wish to see them utterly destroyed. That would unbalance the world even more. But there isn't a Fire Nation soldier alive who has not committed acts of pure evil."

"...Iroh was a soldier," Aang managed.

"Indeed he was," Tao said dryly. "How much do you know of General Iroh, and the Siege of Ba Sing Se?"

"Um..."

"I thought as much." Tao sighed. "If you're not convinced, call one of the spirits haunting this vessel. You can compel the truth from them."

"...Why would there be spirits haunting our ship?"

Uh-oh. Katara shot to her feet, heading for Tao's door to pound on it before things got any worse.

"You can't be that numb to the aura of lingering death," Tao said starkly. "Chief Hakoda *took* this ship, Avatar Aang."

Knuckles, metal, start pounding-

"Where did you think the blood came from?"

Wind blasted steel into her, and the world grayed out.

"-Wake up. Wake *up*, Katara, don't do this, I'm *scared*-"

Gritty hands against her head. And Toph was *never* scared. "I'm awake," Katara said through the pounding headache. "I'm - oh, no."

Tao's cabin was shredded. The shaman himself was barricaded in a corner behind a low wall of the stone Toph had brought on board, looking as dazed as anyone who'd been at ground zero of one of

Aang's rare losses of temper. And the window-

The window's gone. "Where's Aang?"

"Not far enough away, when I get through with him." Toph's words were angry, but she brushed something away from one milky eye. "Darn dust... You were *down*, Katara. You weren't talking, you didn't hear me-"

"He didn't know we were here!" Katara defended her friend. What Aang heard, how he must have felt - it was *awful*.

"He didn't know there *wasn't* anyone here, Sugar Queen!" Metal creaked under Toph's toes, quivering. "I tell him to sense the earth. I tell him to *listen*. And what's he do when he loses it? This is *it*. We catch him, I am going to *sit* on him until he tells you he's sorry and *he knows he hurt you*."

Catch him? "He's not on the ship."

"Sokka and the guys are looking, but I don't feel him anywhere," Toph said flatly. "He's gone. His glider's gone. Appa and Momo are still here."

Gritting her teeth, Katara levered herself upright. "We've got to find him."

"Duh. Where? I can track dirt, not water. And for sure not air!"

Katara shook her head, and winced. "We don't have to track him. We know where he's going."

"The one spot no sane guy would be?" Toph grumbled.

I do not need to hear Zuko from you, Katara started to say.

And stopped, and thought better of it. "Ah... well, kind of."

Toph's shoulders slumped, and she groaned. "The Fire Nation."

"I think so," Katara admitted.

"Without us? *Why?*"

"Because we betrayed him."

"*We* betrayed *him*?" Toph sputtered. "How hard did he hit you with that door?"

"We should have told him!" Katara argued. "He wouldn't have been so scared if we'd told him about the raid in the first place."

"Told him?" Tao said, incredulous. A wave of his hand parted rock enough to stand up. "Young lady, are you seriously suggesting he *had* to be told? This is a Fire Nation warship! How could he have thought your chief gained it, save by deadly force?"

Toph blew out a breath. "Twinkletoes can be *really* slow about some stuff." She crossed her arms. "That's why we wanted in on your lessons, you old stick! You keep acting like Aang's from *now*! Well, he's not! He's from back when people didn't kill each other. Not around him. He didn't even see Sozin's Comet the *first* time it came, and you act like he ought to be just as mad at the Fire Nation as *you* are-"

"Toph!" Katara cut her off. "Tell Dad what happened. I'm going to get Sokka and some supplies."

She set her jaw. "We're going after him."

Docked at the seediest merchant's pier he'd ever seen in his life, Hakoda stepped away from the *Kichigai's* rail, back toward their currently unwelcome ally. A few of his warriors were in town, playing the part of Fire Navy sailors to gain information from the locals. The rest were enjoying a well-deserved break before they flung themselves into the next stage of Sokka's plan. But Bato was here, a quiet guard against whatever powers a shaman might call... and a bit further off, Asiavik picked through his healing kit. To pick up the pieces, after all was said and done.

And quite a bit needs to be said, Hakoda thought, far beyond annoyed. *Be smart, Sokka. Keep them safe.* "I suppose I should be glad we're not having this conversation in front of the children."

Tao stood straight, dignified and unrepentant. "I know you consider the boy family. And any man would be upset to see a child race headlong into danger. But I had no idea he would react so strongly. It's *impossible* that anyone could be that naive about war. Even an airbender from a century ago. They watched Sozin invade the first time!"

The father in him wanted to strangle the man. The chief in him sat up and took note. *Sozin's first invasion. Why is that important?* "That was years before Aang was born," Hakoda pointed out. "You know what children are like. Anything before their time isn't quite real, until they grow up enough to take their tribe's stories to heart." He glanced aside, as if considering the matter; watching from the corner of his eye. "Aang has told me about his life with Gyatso. It doesn't sound as though stories about Sozin were part of the Temple's lore."

There. A flare of nostrils. White-pinked lips. Old, bitter anger.

"I know you of Earth like your grudges, but this is going too far," Hakoda said pointedly. "What could Sozin have done to you? You weren't even born then. And don't tell me it was what he did to your people. You know Aang better than that. He doesn't understand revenge. Hurting someone if you have to, so they won't kill you - that he understands. But last I heard, Sozin died decades ago."

"I bared my shame to the Avatar, he was polite enough to let it rest, and you *dare* tell me he doesn't understand?" Tao said darkly.

"Aang?" Bato muttered, just loud enough to hear. "Polite?"

Painfully true. If not quite accurate; Aang *was* polite. For an airbender. For any other tribe - well, he'd seen Sokka trying not to tear his hair out. "What shame?"

Tao's eyes narrowed. "That is none of your-"

He didn't like using his size to intimidate people. But sometimes nothing else would do. "My son and daughter are flying into the Fire Nation to find him," Hakoda said grimly. "That little earthbender, their friend, who has always been a reliable ally - unlike your army - is going with them. They may not come back. Tell me *why*."

The look Tao gave him was pure poison. "As I told the Avatar," he gritted out, "after the invasion, my mother decided Taku was far too unlucky to give birth there."

That? That was it? "My mother would have decided the same," Hakoda stated, trying to make sense of it. "Why camp where the enemy can find you?"

"Your mother," Tao snorted. "Doesn't your father have any pride?"

"They'd argue things out until they agreed on something," Hakoda answered. "I don't understand-"

Bato coughed. "Earth Kingdom. Fathers lead the family."

Ah. Right. And hadn't that gotten him in trouble sometimes, trying to negotiate for the tribe. He could forget it around Toph; the blind girl was so relentlessly self-sufficient he almost wondered if Kanna had forgotten a cousin somewhere on the Eastern continent as she'd made her way south. How had Toph handled her own father? "So they killed your father. Why not say so?"

He'd never seen someone so pale with rage and shame. "No. I suspect they would have congratulated him," Tao hissed. "If they thought of it at all."

...*Oh.*

Hakoda held his ground, unflinching. And he'd thought his daughter hated the Fire Nation. The pallor of the skin inside Tao's wrists, where sleeves usually blocked the weathering sun; the hint of *other* to the eyes, beyond the overall otherness of *not Water Tribe*. Little details he'd missed, covered by time and a manner wholly, deliberately Earth. "Aang didn't know."

"That's preposterous-"

"Stop." Hakoda stared him down. "Let me tell you about one of the most frightening things my daughter has ever done in her life. Frightening to me, at least; she didn't think anything of it. Did you know Katara inspired an entire prison barge of earthbenders to revolt?"

"A noble deed, but-"

"She did it," Hakoda cut across his words, "by pretending to be an earthbender, and allowing herself to be captured."

Tao started, shaken loose from his anger. "That young girl? How - but - where was her brother? Where was the *Avatar*?"

"They were helping," Hakoda said, not at all kindly. "You see, they were going to break her right back out that evening. She wasn't in any. Danger. At all."

Bato winced.

"The Fire Nation doesn't like to fight on ice," Hakoda went on. "They'd stay long enough to raid, kill or capture waterbenders, and melt parts of a settlement. That's it. That's all. They haven't raped a Water Tribe woman in my lifetime." He shook his head. "Sokka and Katara didn't think there was a danger. Why should they? They were chased by Prince Zuko. Apparently the worst he's ever done to Katara was tie her to a tree for Avatar-bait. He was the enemy. But he was never a monster."

Tao was silent, even as he was shaking his head.

"They didn't think of it," Hakoda said deliberately. "And I'm not sure Aang even knows rape *exists*." He sighed. "Apparently, young monks don't get to visit the nuns for *spring festivals* until they're eighteen."

"Until they're..." Tao buried his head in his hands. "Guanyin, have mercy. What have I done?"

"I wish she'd have mercy on the rest of us," Hakoda said practically. "He's not of our tribe, he's not of our time - I almost think I'd have better luck trying to understand a star dropped out of the sky."

He sighed again. "If anyone can reach him, those three will. I just hope you've taught him enough to handle any nasty surprises we hit when we invade the Fire capital."

Raising his head, Tao blinked. "When we *what*?"

Hakoda grinned.

Draw. Aim. Loose.

Steel thudded into the target, even farther off center than she'd anticipated. The last rays of twilight were fading past the sandstone walls her Dai Li had raised around this patch of shore, and Azula could feel her fire dimming with them.

At least there will be moonlight to fuel us tonight. Azula lowered her bow, studying the target without a glance at the sky. The Earth Kingdom knew firebenders were weaker at night. If they hadn't realized firebending was even weaker on specific nights, she wasn't about to clue them in.

Not perfect. Not anywhere near perfect. Which was annoying. Far, far more than annoying; Fire Lord Ozai's daughter was supposed to be perfect, and if the court saw this-

But incinerating the targets would be wasteful. And...

How very odd. She didn't *feel* like burning the targets to ashes.

That water-witch's fault.

Whatever that water-working had been, it stood like a railing between her and the ever-hungry pit in her soul. She felt the despair. She tasted the bitter ash of failure if she disappointed her father...

But so far, the pit could not take her. And it was hard to be properly afraid of something that no longer threatened her.

I'll lose my edge-

Azula caught that thought in a grip of steel, pinning it mercilessly down. It was flawed. Somehow. But how?

"Highness."

Agent Bolin, one of the youngest and most closed-mouthed of her Dai Li. With reason, apparently; Dai Li didn't work alone, yet according to Ty Lee, his partner had somehow chosen to stay behind with the Earth King. The airbender said his aura was still gray with the shock of losing someone he trusted.

Trust. What a laugh. She almost did laugh, as Bolin walked downrange and started carefully pulling shafts from targets. Imperfect aim or not, she could feather him between the shoulder-blades before he could blink.

But that would be wasteful. As casually, carelessly wasteful as letting Ty Lee shudder in terror until her mind broke, when Azula could soothe some of that fear away. And the Dai Li followed her because she was *not* wasteful. Not careless. Not foolish. As Long Feng had been all three.

The Dai Li trusted her not to be needlessly cruel. What a very odd thought.

Some fear is useful. It keeps you alert. Keeps you pushing forward. Too much fear, and the body

overrules the mind. You saw it in Ty Lee. If she's too afraid, she can't think...

Cold. Ice in her soul.

Am I... too afraid of failing Father?

Fear led to impatience. Both led to sloppy work. And she should have managed Ba Sing Se far better than she had-

Bolin offered her the shafts, not glancing at the deepening shadows beyond raised stone. "We should get onto the ship, your highness."

"We're leaving just after dawn," Azula said coolly. The better to impress locals with fire, if it became necessary. "Surely there's no need for you to leave solid ground sooner than that."

And why wasn't Hai coming to tell her this? He was senior of the three Dai Li whom Agent Chan had assigned as her personal guard. Much more calm and unruffled than his partner Delun. Even if he did have the same attitude toward Earth Kingdom mail as a magpie-raven did toward shinys. Not coming to see her was an *insult*-

They know better than to insult me.

So there was a problem. Something Hai wanted to head off, personally.

"Princess." Bolin barely hesitated. "Agent Hai would prefer it if you would move over running water. As soon as possible."

Azula arched a dark brow.

"There's something out there. We can *feel* it." Under the shield of his hat, Bolin looked honestly frustrated. And worried. "We don't know what it is. Lady Ty Lee is helping them look."

"Ty Lee?" Azula repeated, not at all sure she'd heard correctly. "Is helping you look for a spirit?"

"She said it reminded her of something." Bolin frowned. "Something she didn't remember before."

Well. That was a different beast entirely. She hadn't been able to track all the details of what Ty Lee's *beloved* Elders had done to her, but Agent Hai had privately agreed with her that it sounded very much like certain... rumors that had always attended the Dai Li. Completely unfair rumors, he'd hastened to add, given all Dai Li techniques had been taught by Avatar Kyoshi herself.

Which means all the rumors are probably true, Azula thought wryly.

Amusing, but not her concern, except where it could help Ty Lee. Which Agent Hai had been doing, using Delun's nervousness to everyone's advantage. The acrobat couldn't help but try to cheer up such a glum, straitlaced fellow, and willingly chattered at him about anything and everything.

If she's remembered one thing, she's probably remembered everything, Hai had told Azula in private. *If she hasn't... you can learn a lot from what someone won't talk about.*

A useful tactic for the future. So long as she had someone else to listen to the torrent of noise.

"If you don't know what it is," Azula pointed out now, "running water might be the worst thing you could do."

Bolin hesitated. "True, your highness. But-"

"Your highness."

Azula turned.

Noblewoman, dressed for travel, the princess decided, taking in the long, crimson nails, the rich but subdued reds and tougher silkwool of the woman's robes. *No senbon up her sleeves, though I'd bet on kunai in her hair. Rooted stance... firebender.*

A firebender whose glance flicked to the bow in Azula's hand with only the slightest hint of narrowed eyes.

Hate and disgust, Azula calculated, as the woman dropped into a precise obeisance; noble to greater heir. *Well covered... but not good enough.* "And you would be?"

"I am called Nawahime, your highness." One hand made a subtle motion near her sleeve.

One of Father's spies. Ordinarily that would be good, not to mention entertaining. But now... "I will take your report. In private."

Bolin stirred. "Your highness."

She stepped just close enough for him to hear her whisper. "Make sure she hasn't been near Ty Lee."

Unhappy, he bowed and withdrew. Wise man.

Azula toyed with an arrow as the spy rose. "So. What is the news?"

"The Avatar is within your grasp, your highness."

That was unexpected. "The Avatar was declared dead," Azula said levelly.

"For purposes of morale." Nawahime's eyes were cold as her own.

"Not something you should joke about, Lady Nawahime." Binding rope princess? Father's spies were a bit too flamboyant, sometimes.

Which was good evidence that this *was* one of Father's spies, and not one of those Byakko ran for the Fire Lord. Old Lord Kuzon had made a habit of finding the most incredibly ordinary people to spy for him, and Kotone had apparently kept up the habit.

"Forgive my presumption, Princess." A slight bow. "My network in the Earth Kingdom was badly damaged by Earth King Kuei. But the Avatar was foolish enough to set foot outside those lands, and now... now we have found him again." Gold eyes blazed. "The Southern Water Tribe took the *Kichigai* by force and treachery, and the Avatar set foot upon it. They were spotted at harbor only a few days' sail from here. Seize him, and our victory is complete."

Taken a Fire Navy ship? Clever, clever barbarians. That explained quite a few interesting tidbits of intelligence. "Is there anything else?"

Nawahime's eyes narrowed.

"Don't be a fool." Azula kept her voice light, almost pleasant. "I'm not my brother. The Fire Lord's plans will take your report into account. That's all you need to know."

"To not act when your enemy is within your grasp." Nawahime's voice was iced silk. "To allow or even aid his escape... are you certain you are not your brother?"

For a moment, the world seemed to flicker red.

Calm. Control. "Who do you think you are?" Azula said, sharp as shattered glass.

"The pieces are set. The endgame is at hand. And a pawn thinks itself a queen," the spy mused. "You let your enemy run, and assume he will race into your grasp? That is a *mistake*-"

Ready for treachery, Azula lashed out with blue fire.

Nawahime... caught it.

Impossible.

"Silly child." Nawahime bounced the ball of flame on her fingertips, blue burning hotter and fiercer than summer sky.

Impossible, Azula thought. *The last firebender to bend blue flame was...*

"But you do favor my line, somewhat. Even with Byakko written across your face." Perfect lips pulled back in a snarl that showed far too many teeth. "*Ursa's* daughter. Damn the Fire Sages, and damn that puling whelp Shidan! I should have killed her in her sleep before she ever tainted Ozai with the scent of her hair-"

"You *take that back!*"

Because yes, Ursa was a fool, and a traitor, and Grandfather's killer, and she'd *always* loved Zuko best-

But she was Mother. And no one, *no one* had the right to say such filthy, hateful things-!

...*Heh*, Azula almost chuckled, as blue flames snarled and twisted over sand. Looked like she could pull off a good imitation of Zuzu's fiery rages after all. Good. The more Nawahime underestimated her, the better. Whoever - *whatever* - the spy was, she was *good*, and Azula needed every edge she could get as she spun and slashed and parried-

The hand that caught her heel-strike should have shattered like glass.

It didn't. It held. It *squeezed*.

Bones splintered. Muscle seared and flayed, charred by blue flame. The ground came up, and the world blacked out.

Get up, Azula told herself, somewhere in the gray haze. *You're the Fire Lord's daughter. You are the strongest firebender in your generation. Get up.*

Haze faded to almost-clear, to the sound of her own shallow gasps. Azula blinked, trying to move past the pain. Trying to *think*.

"Foolish child. Did you truly think you could fight me?"

Clawed fingers pierced her cheek, and fire burned into her mind.

"...*An interesting plan.*"

You're in my head. You can't be in my head, get out-

"Crush your enemy in his own gamble. Ruthless." Almost a purr. "Worthy of Sozin."

I'll kill you for this, I swear!

"What. Is. This?"

Fire, searing across her shelter from despair-

Azula twisted. Dug fingers into sand as the world roared back, and threw.

Damn. I was hoping to hit her eyes.

But the creature had blinked, just for a moment. Azula wrung it dry, rolling aside from claw-tipped fingers, up and to her feet-

Foot. The other was a mass of blinding pain, and she was *not* going to look down. She didn't have to, as Ty Lee landed beside her and sandstone rose to block fireballs in a crash of sand and glass. "Azula!"

"Alive!" Azula snarled, as Dai Li dodged fire and rained stone back on the creature. "I want that thing alive!"

"Thing?" A dark laugh. "You don't even know what you are."

She knew that tone. She'd heard that tone, from Azulon and Father and in her own ears-

"I'll *teach* you."

No.

No time to think, as the creature eeled around rocks like a summer-dance, like Zuzu playing; robed arms were out and looping and the *sparks*, oh those beautiful deadly sparks-

No time to think. So she didn't. Only stepped in front of the target-

It's just pain just pain you know what she wants she was in your head she hates weakness hates life hates Air you know-

-And move.

Uncle could do it. Zuzu could do it. It couldn't be that hard.

Thunder cracked, and the world burned.

...Azula blinked, feeling lashes sweep over sand. She was lying on sand. Tasting sand, and salt, and that odd snap of a smell that followed lightning. And breathing hurt.

Burns. Burns inside, but not like fire.

Someone was screaming.

But Ty Lee never screams...

"-Bury her! Sink her and *don't let her come up*, oh spirits no, Azula-!"

"Uh," Azula managed. Blinked again; shadows, light, Ty Lee gripping her hand...

And a swirling whirlpool in the sand, surrounded by grim Dai Li. Good.

Blink. And the world had shifted again, Bolin and Dalun lifting her while Hai cursed spirits and spirits-in-flesh to turn the air blue. "Don't know if the scrolls the rebels in Ba Sing Se have been scattering to the Earth Army are right, and this is *not* how I wanted to find out-"

Sealed sand shattered. A whirlwind of blue flame roared up, coalescing into scales and mane and fangs...

A dragon. Azula's heart shuddered. *The dragons are dead.*

This one looked alive, hovering over them, breathing *in*-

Ty Lee shrieked, impossibly loud, pitch climbing high until it made the inside of Azula's ears itch. The massive head flinched.

"Here!" Hai shouted, outthrust hands compressing sand into a rising rattle of razor shards; Ty Lee bent and *whipped*-

A gale slashed shards through azure wings.

Shrieking outrage, bleeding, the tattered-winged dragon fled.

All the while, Azula's head rang with mocking laughter.

"Foolish child. You've set the stage perfectly.

"Did you think the Avatar was my only enemy?"

And the world slid sideways, and she had to tell them, had to warn...

Ty Lee. Gripping her hand. Angry and warm and alive, thank Agni, *alive*.

Ty Lee was here. It had to be safe. She could just-

"Azula!"

A/N: Given some of the questions I've been asked about Ozai, Azula, Zuko, and the whole dragon-child mess, I thought I'd share a few genetics terms: hybrid vigor and hybrid breakdown.

A lot of people are familiar with hybrid vigor. Cross two very different pure strains, and the offspring can be more successful than either parent. There are various reasons for this, ranging from a lucky genetic outcome (not all hybrids do well) to the extreme that some genes (or gene complexes, bunches of related genes) are over-expressed because the other half of the hybrid's DNA doesn't have a "match" to them. (See mules and ligers.)

Hybrid breakdown is a little more complicated. It basically hinges on the fact that because of chromosome crossover (part of how most organisms form gametes to reproduce), we do not inherit genes and gene complexes as discrete units. Not always.

Say we have two "pure" strains to begin; call them red and green. Imagine each individual with

their set of genes; a pair of chromosomes, two long strings of colored beads. (Humans have much more than one, but let's keep it simple.) Red parent has two strands of red. Green has two of green. Before they reproduce, crossover happens - but since they are pure strains, red crossing over with red still gives you a strand of red, and likewise for green. So your hybrid has one red strand, and one green. A good setup for hybrid vigor, and reasonably simple.

The problem comes when your hybrid reproduces. The red and green strands line up to crossover... and the resulting single strand that goes into the offspring (and its genes) is a patchwork of red and green. You may literally have part of a gene from one of your hybrid's parents, and part from the other. The resulting gene may not work. It may work somewhat, but not as well as an all-red or all-green gene. (This, BTW, is part of what's called outbreeding depression.) Or it may not work at all... which can be lethal.

Now, if your hybrid dragon-child is breeding back into a plain vanilla human line (for example, Azulon and Ilah), this can be survivable. The "mixed" gene can be compensated for by a "plain" human gene, and all should be well. Plain dragon would also work - in the case of Sozin and Tejjina, Tejjina's "plain" dragon genes would compensate. Again, it works. (This is called introgression.)

The problem comes when a hybrid has offspring with another hybrid.

Hear that? Yes, that is a Hell Is That Noise. That is the sound of a million possible very bad genetic outcomes, cackling in unholy glee.

You now have the chance for mixed, barely functional, weirdly functional, or otherwise scrambled genes on both sides. And one of the most complicated, delicate, jury-rigged bits of evolution we have, so dependent on healthy genes, is a sane, intelligent brain.

Long story short: There is every reason Sozin, Azulon, Ozai, Iroh, Lu Ten, and Ursa should be sane and rational. A few of them might incline more to the draconic definition of sane, but they're sane.

Zuko and Azula, though, are screwed.

...This also explains why Azula the prodigy bent at four. Some parts of her genes are human. Some are dragon. The mix is not predictable. It is entirely possible for Azula to have some traits that are more dragon than Zuko, and others that are more human. And the same for him. It's even possible that one of the pair is almost entirely human. Though the odds are against it.

Crossover also helps explain how long-buried traits like Fire or Air heritage can resurface without being strictly dominant or recessive. Get enough scattered pieces of one allele to combine, and poof! Somebody's got a heritage the family tried to bury generations ago.

FYI, this is also why stories with "nations of half-elves" tend to have me tossing them across the room or Headdesking. Genetic inheritance does not work that way. If by some chance it did, we'd probably be talking about a situation of codominant alleles at one major locus, which means that of every four offspring, 2 would be half-elves, one elf, and one human, and you don't see that happening...

I know, I know. A Wizard Did It. I'd just like to see a story where someone thought about this...

Shidan is giving Ozai way too much credit for sanity. Everybody makes mistakes. Eshe is Ancient Egyptian, meaning life. (All the Touzaikaze have Ancient Egyptian names. They're from a desert, it fit.)

I used the milpa system as inspiration for Fire Nation agriculture, and put in a bunch of actual Andean crops in here. They're exactly what you'd want for volcanic and high-altitude environments. "Oogami nuts" = lupin seeds. And yes, one type of Vietnamese transparent noodles (miến dong) is made not with mung beans, but with a crop that originated in the Andes. This amuses me, just like pizza being an Italian dish (tomatoes, heh) and "American as apple pie" (apples coming from Eurasia). Sometimes, people are just cool.

I've had this background for Tao in mind all along, especially after the prison barge episode. I know, in Real Life the reason Katara isn't worried about maltreatment is because this is a kid's cartoon. Even so. If people consider the Fire Nation monsters, and it's a more realistic setting... I'm sure some were.

And while shamans and medicine men may have been honored in many societies, more often they were respected - warily - because they were weird and dangerous. The social outcasts, barely accepted by the rest of their group. The outsiders. And yes, sometimes of mixed blood. Which is a lot more daunting in societies where your group is The Real People and everybody else is not. (And if the Earth Kingdom is modeled after ancient China - yes, that is exactly what they think.)

I know I'm hard on Aang. I find him really, really hard to write. (For one, I can't remember ever - ever - being as naive about the vicious things people do to each other as Aang is portrayed in canon.) Azula is easier for me to write than Aang.

But if Aang weren't Aang, this story would not have a happy ending. And it will.

...Well, mostly happy. With this many Doom Magnets? Sometimes, breaking even is good.

"How big is Asagitatsu? Would it be like Mt. St. Helens? Or Krakatoa? Santorini used to be a volcano too." Yes. Yes, it did. So did (or more accurately, is) Lake Toba.

en. [wikipedia wiki/Toba_catastrophe_theory](https://en.wikipedia/wiki/Toba_catastrophe_theory)

...What, did you think Koh was leaving things to chance this time?

Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lava. Smoke. And an unsettling emptiness of people, like a missing tooth. The only good thing about being on Crescent Island was the Fire Nation wasn't looking here.

Yet, Aang thought glumly, huddled in a ball against black rocks. He wanted to be huddled up against Appa, like Katara and Sokka and Momo and even Toph's rock tent...

He did, and he didn't. It felt better being alone.

What am I doing?

He'd *said* he was sorry to Katara for hurting her. Over and over and *over* again. For some reason, Toph wasn't buying it.

...*Buying* truth. Earth Kingdom. Crazy. Truth was in the air. People said it, or they didn't. You couldn't buy the air!

And he *was* sorry. He hated it when Katara got hurt. But this wasn't like the fire with Jeong Jeong. He hadn't been playing around. He'd been listening to a lesson, and Tao had - and they weren't even supposed to *be* there, Toph had pretty much said they were spying on Tao, how could they blame him for blasting stuff when nobody was supposed to be *there*?

"It's not my fault," Aang muttered. "I'm *sorry*. But you guys were the ones spying."

Not his fault. But the North Pole wasn't his fault either, and he still felt awful about it.

But I had to. They weren't just going to go away. Aang winced. *I said I was sorry. And Katara's okay now. Toph will figure that out in the morning.*

Tap. Rock against pebble. *Tap.* Softer in sand. *Tap.* Leather on rock and sand, boots-

Aang whirled on the little spirit, earth rising with his clenched fist to grip something almost as ephemeral as smoke. "Why can't you just *leave me alone*?"

A squeak, leather on leather. And leather came from *killing things*, and everybody else used it, Water Tribes and Earth Kingdom and Fire Nation, and he was so sick of *everyone*-

Someone yanked a shred of earth away from him, one wire-thin sliver of stone peeled back so leather could wriggle free. "Boots! Out of there!"

Toph. Who else? "Make that go away," he said, still mad.

"He was trying to." Toph stood like the tiniest of mountains, dust whispering around her feet as the little spirit scrambled behind her. "Think I'm feeling a pattern here."

"What?" Aang blurted out. Because she wasn't - she couldn't-

She can't what?

His thoughts were all tangled, and all he could figure out was that she ought to be mad - which was

crazy, *he* was the one who should be mad, no one was making *her* go after the Fire Lord!

Which made him feel guilty, because Toph didn't have to go after the Fire Lord. But she was. Which made him madder. Killing was *wrong*, and if he had to - had to stop the Fire Lord, then she shouldn't *want* to do it too-

"Twinkletoes!" Toph had her hands out, as if she could brace against the breeze. "Think like a rock!"

"I don't want to think like a rock!"

...Ouch. Now his throat hurt.

But he'd gotten this far. And he had to say it to *somebody*. "I'm an airbender, Toph. I'm a *monk*. That's who I am. That's who I want to be. I don't want to be like you!" He threw his hands down, rock shattering away. "I don't want to be like any of you!"

"Wha- whoozit - we getting attacked by earthbenders?" Sokka sat up, Boomerang in hand.

Weapons. Always weapons. Always being prepared to hurt people. It *wasn't right*. Why couldn't it all just *go away*?

"Aang." Katara was still wrapped in her bedroll; usually the Fire Nation was warm, but there was a cold wind from the north tonight. "I know we should have told you about the ship. But... we just couldn't find the right way to say it-"

"There isn't any right way to say it, Katara!" Aang gulped. "I thought - I thought your father was like a teacher. Like Gyatso. I thought he was listening to me! But all the time he was - he-" He shook his head, hating everything he was saying. But what was he supposed to do? "When did everybody turn into monsters?"

"What?" Katara looked like someone had slapped her. "You... think Dad is... Aang, how could you?"

Toph cracked her knuckles.

"How could I?" Aang said in disbelief. "I'm not the one who killed everybody on a whole ship, and left *blood* everywhere, and - your dad says before the Fire Nation came you used to kill *your own people*, and-"

"Okay! Everybody, *stop*." Sokka stood up; eyes alert, even if they were still shadowed with sleep. "Toph. Katara. Make sure we didn't attract any attention. Aang?" He walked right up to the airbender, face grim. "Let's go for a walk."

Dark, and black sand, and only their own footsteps along the shore. Sokka sighed, looking up at the moon. "She helped you ride a wave all the way back here, huh? Wish I could have told her thanks. And know she heard it."

Aang ducked his head, feeling a little guilty. Yue talked to him when he needed help. Sokka? He'd been in trouble lots of times, and the moon hadn't done anything.

The Avatar always had the spirits' attention. Somehow, that didn't feel comforting.

"I'm sorry," Aang blurted out. "I know your dad's not... he's trying, I guess."

Sokka took a deep breath, and slowly let it out. "You know, if we could stop the war right now, I'd do it."

"Well, yeah." Aang frowned. "Sure you would. Anybody would."

"Aang. Just listen, okay?"

Confused, Aang nodded.

"I hate the war. I hate what that Fire Nation's done. To us, to the world... to Mom." His jaw set, determined. "But if General Fong was an idiot, he was right about one thing. The longer the war goes on, the more people get hurt. And... I don't think Mom would want that. She'd want it to be over. So Dad and the men could come back, and we could start living instead of fighting. If we could stop the war right now, with *nobody* else getting hurt - I think Mom would want that."

That's not what Zuko said Katara wants, Aang thought, trying not to get mad all over again. How could Zuko think he knew *anything* about Katara? She was Water Tribe. A healer. *She'd* never put swords to his neck just to get a gate open. She wasn't anything like him at all.

"Attacking on the eclipse - people are going to get hurt," Sokka stated. "Some of them are going to die. But we've fought a lot of firebenders. They're not dumb. If they can't bend, they'll try to back off until they can - and then we'll have Ozai. We'll *have* him, Aang. So *he* can decide if he's going to do the right thing."

Aang swallowed. "But if he doesn't..."

"If he doesn't, that's *his* fault," Sokka said bluntly. "A chief has to do what's right for his people. If he won't - then we do what we have to do." He grimaced. "I wish I could give you a better plan, Aang. I really wish I could. I wish I could say, we're going to do this, and it's going to work, and Ozai's going to see sense if we have to pound it into him. But - I can't. This is all I've got."

Aang wiggled fingers in the air, not sure what to say. But it felt a lot less angry in his head. "I thought you wanted to fight the Fire Nation. That's what you said, when you and Katara got me off Zuko's ship."

"Yeah, I did," Sokka nodded. "I did then. Kind of seen more than enough fighting since." He chewed on his lip, thinking. "It's like you with earthbending. I like *learning* how to fight. I liked sparring with the rest of the warriors. It means I'm a man of the tribe. It's what I'm supposed to do, you know? I'm Dad's son. I've got to be a warrior. But if I never had to fight anybody else again for real? I could live with that." He frowned. "Aang?"

"...I gotta sit down." Breathe. Feel the air. Maybe he was in the Fire Nation, but the wind was all around him. Wind was *always* there.

Sokka crouched beside him. "You okay?"

"I'm *confused*." Aang tried to put the pieces together. "Didn't your dad teach you to fight the Fire Nation?"

Sokka gave him a look askance. "He taught me to fight so I could protect the village."

"But you came along with me," Aang objected. "That's not protecting the village." *That's not what your dad taught you. How can you do that?*

Sokka kept looking at him. "Aang, if we pull this off, you're going to save the *world*."

"...Oh." Aang had to rub his head, hair and all, because that - he just hadn't thought of that. Protect the world, and of *course* Sokka protected the village. Wow. That was the neatest way of getting around teachings *ever*.

"Oh?" Sokka echoed. "Why would you ever think we'd leave you alone with this mess? We're friends. Friends help each other out. Like the guys in your temple, right?"

Aang had to look away. "Not when it's not fair."

"Huh?"

"Come *on*, Sokka." Aang rolled his eyes. "Katara *told* you."

"No," Sokka said slowly, "I don't think she did. What are you talking about?"

"It was during the storm," Aang insisted. "You know."

"I know we got so sick after that, I thought I was an earthbender," Sokka said wryly. "All I remember is Katara saying something about playing airbender games more, since you hadn't gotten to do that in a while. Like a hundred years, right?" His grin faded. "I'm missing something. Help me out."

"Katara didn't tell you," Aang said, stunned. And hurt. "I told her, it was awful... the other kids wouldn't let me play, and - she didn't tell you?"

"She didn't," Sokka stated. "What do you mean, they wouldn't let you play? You're a great guy. I'd take you on my team for a stickball game any day."

"Yeah," Aang said, trying not to be mad about it. "Who wouldn't want the Avatar on their team?"

"What? Aang, that's not-"

"The Elders told everybody," Aang said; getting it out fast, before it could hurt too much. "I couldn't be on the teams anymore. It wasn't fair. Everybody said, the only fair thing to do was not let me play. So they didn't." He swallowed. "So I can't - you guys shouldn't have to fight the Fire Nation with me. It's not fair. And the Avatar's supposed to make things fair."

Sokka stood still a moment, staring. "Your Elders did... right. Aang? Give me a minute, okay?" Straightening his shoulders, he walked around some cooled lava, out of sight.

Aang strained his ears, even trying to feel with his feet the way Toph did. That sounded a lot like cursing. And something hitting sand, hard.

Why? What'd I do?

A last, incoherent "Arrgh!" A sigh. And Sokka came back, still looking like he wanted to break nuts with his bare hands. "Okay," Sokka got out. "Before I go completely nuts - did Gyatso try to fix this? Did he do anything?"

Aang frowned. He hadn't thought about that in a while. The Elders had *made* their decision. "He wasn't happy about it," he said at last. "He said maybe we should take a trip early, and go see Bumi and Kuzon. You know what kind of crazy stuff Bumi pulls; it wouldn't matter if I *was* the Avatar. And Kuzon would've just teamed up with Shidan, and me against a dragon? I bet that would have been fair." He grinned a little, thinking of it. "But the Elders heard about it, and they didn't want Gyatso to train me anymore, they were going to send me *away*, so - so I ran. And got frozen. And

then you guys found me."

"Gyatso was a good guy," Sokka said quietly.

Lump in his throat, Aang nodded.

"You know, you and Katara have a lot in common," Sokka went on. "You both worry a lot about *fair*. Maybe sometimes you shouldn't."

Aang's jaw dropped. "But-"

"We're fighting the whole Fire Nation. We *have* to win. And Ozai has to lose. That means we don't fight fair." Sokka looked serious. "A fair fight means more people die."

"But I'm supposed to keep things fair," Aang protested. "I'm the Avatar."

"The Avatar's supposed to keep things balanced," Sokka stated. "Right now? That's not happening. First we stop Ozai. Then we worry about what's fair." He held up a lecturing finger. "And that means you've got to stop ditching us, Aang. Sure, it's not fair we have to fight the Fire Nation. It's not fair *anybody* does. But somebody's got to." He spread empty hands. "We said we'd help, Aang. Not, *we'll help until it gets too dangerous*. Not *until we get bored*. Not *until we get scared*. We know what we're up against. What you're up against. You're not going to do this alone." Sokka gave him a wry grin. "That wouldn't be *fair*."

Aang grinned. "You've got a cool definition of fair."

"Just one condition."

Uh-oh.

"You need to think about what you're bending," Sokka said seriously. "You're an incredible bender, Aang. Maybe Kuzon and Bumi were used to that, but we aren't. Now, Katara's not going to tell you this, because she's got this crazy idea she shouldn't have been listening in on your lesson-"

"Well, she shouldn't have," Aang said, more than a little annoyed. If she hadn't been *there*, she wouldn't have gotten hurt. "Those were private."

"Since when?" Sokka said skeptically. "I watch you train with Toph and Katara all the time."

"That's different!"

Sokka eyed him. "Aang? Man to man, I'm warning you. If you say it's 'cause they're girls, Toph is going to bury you. And Katara's going to help."

"Huh? No!" Sheesh; what did *girls* have to do with it? "They're *kids*." Sokka looked blank. Great, just *great*. How simple did he have to make it? "We're not supposed to train in private. Not without an elder." And if Tao wasn't an elder, who was? Even Guru Pathik might not be that old.

"You trained Katara in waterbending," Sokka pointed out.

"Because she really wanted to," Aang shrugged. "Master Pakku said the *Water Tribe* doesn't train girls. I'm not Water Tribe."

"Kind of noticed," Sokka muttered. "Okay. So this doesn't happen again? Tell Dad when something's supposed to be private. When we think private, it's a lot more... you know, guys' mysteries, and stuff. Or girls' mysteries - and nobody wants to cross Gran-Gran. Regular lessons,

history and stuff? That's for everybody. Dad didn't know."

Aang heaved a sigh. "But I *told* Katara!"

"Maybe she didn't get it," Sokka said practically. "You're kind of hard to figure out sometimes." He waved a hand. "Anyway, not the point. I saw the temples. I guess when one of the monks got upset and whipped up a breeze, it didn't hurt much. You were all airbenders; if some wind came your way, you could handle it." He paused. "But we're not airbenders, Aang. We don't see it coming. Like Toph didn't, in the Rumble. You've got to be more careful."

Now *that* wasn't fair. "What do you want me to do? Hold my breath forever?" Aang flung up his hands. "*I'm* hard to figure out? Your dad's the one who- who-" He didn't want to think about it.

But I've got to.

"How can your dad be so nice and still like to kill people?"

He couldn't see much in the starlight, but somehow he just knew Sokka was red. The older boy was making that weird little stifled growl, that didn't sound friendly at all.

But Sokka ducked his head and breathed a few times. And nodded to himself. "Okay. I'm going to start with something really, really simple. I hope." Another breath. "Aang. Where'd you ever get the idea my dad likes killing anybody?"

Aang tensed, ready to bolt, or bend, or *something*. If Chief Hakoda was like Sokka's teacher, that had to hurt.

But he didn't sound angry. At least, not a lot. "Well... he did it."

Sokka eyed him.

"What?" Aang blurted out. "He did!"

"I'm thinking." Sokka paced the sand, back and forth, fingers poking absently at the leather wrapping Boomerang's grip. "About our trip. And elephant koi. And Pakku. And everything."

"...That's a lot to think about." And what did any of their trip have to do with what Chief Hakoda did? *They* weren't trying to kill anybody. Sometimes - sometimes they'd had to. But that was totally different!

"No kidding," Sokka said under his breath. "Let me get this straight. When people do something, it's because they *like* doing it?"

"Well - not *everybody*," Aang admitted. "You have to do what your teacher says, when you're a kid. And everybody getting attacked by the Fire Nation - I know they don't *want* to fight back. They just have to. But your dad..." Maybe he shouldn't say it? But Sokka had *asked*. "The Fire Nation wasn't attacking your village anymore. They hadn't come in *years*. So he had to want to leave, to go after them. To - to kill them."

Sokka looked him up and down. Glanced aside, rubbing his head.

"Sokka?"

"Keep it simple," Sokka said, half to himself. "Okay. So when Zuko attacked our village, it was because he wanted to?"

"No, he didn't! He was lying!" Aang said heatedly. "So if he was lying about that, he could have been lying about *anything*. And nobody else was talking, so I couldn't tell if they were liars, too. I *had* to get them away from you guys." *No matter what it took.*

Sokka rubbed his head again. "You thought Zuko was lying, but you didn't think Jet was."

"But Jet *wasn't* lying," Aang said reluctantly. "He was after the Fire Nation all the time. He wanted us to help him stop them. He just didn't say he was going to hurt other people to do it. He thought that old man *was* an assassin. Because... well, I guess because if the Freedom Fighters realized he was just an old man, then Jet would be wrong. And Jet was their *teacher*."

"My head hurts," Sokka muttered. "Teachers can't be wrong?"

"They can't be *that* wrong! The Elders would never let anybody teach who'd trick someone into getting people hurt!"

Sokka winced. "Um. Did you notice Jet didn't have any Elders?"

"Well, he should have! But he didn't lie. Like Long Feng. Remember? He never said he *didn't* know where Appa was." Aang shrugged. "He didn't start lying until he was talking to the Earth King. Boy, that was dumb."

"This has got to make sense," Sokka said under his breath. "Somehow. I just don't know how yet."

Aang glared at him. "It makes sense when nobody's trying to *kill* anybody!"

Sokka laughed.

Huh?

"You're right." Sokka grinned at him, just a little rueful. "You are absolutely right."

Aang blinked. "I am?"

"When nobody's trying to kill you - yeah. It makes sense," Sokka nodded. "When nothing in the world can get up the mountain to hurt you... when nobody fights, and nobody's ever hungry... when you can't even show off for a girl, because there aren't any there... yeah. I guess it does make sense." He stared off into the darkness. "Man. They must have hated your guts."

Aang wanted to flinch. Swallowed hard, and stood his ground. "You say that like you think the Fire Nation was right!" It hurt, how could Sokka - how could he *ever* - ?

"I never said that, Aang. And I never will," Sokka said sharply. "They were wrong. Sozin was *wrong*. This whole war - there's no words for how wrong this mess is. I'm saying I think I *understand*. Just a little."

"You understand the crazy people?" Aang said skeptically. "Kuzon wasn't like these guys. *Nobody* in the Fire Nation was! I don't know what happened!"

"What about Shiyu?" Sokka was looking at him, very intently. "And Jeong Jeong? Those Fire Nation guards at Gaipan? Jet was ambushing them for *months*. But when I told them the town was going to flood, they listened. They got everybody out." He paused. "Was Kuzon like that?"

"I guess," Aang said at last. "I didn't... Gyatso never let us go to the Fire Nation in storm season. He said people would be busy. So I never knew what they did about floods."

"You never saw them backed into a corner." Sokka nodded. "It makes a difference, Aang. It makes a big difference when there's nowhere to run to. And that's why Dad took the fight to the Fire Nation. He knew they'd be back. He knew they weren't going to stop. Just like Ozai's not going to stop. Unless we make him."

Aang's heart sank. "Yeah."

"Aang." Sokka looked serious. "Why are you fighting the Fire Lord?"

"To stop the war!" Aang said, disbelieving. "What kind of question is that?"

"I'm fighting to stop the war. Dad's fighting to protect our people. Katara's fighting to protect *you*. And Toph's in it because she promised, and she wants us to win." Sokka crossed his arms. "So why are you fighting? Not the Avatar. You. Aang."

"Because I have to," Aang insisted. "I am the Avatar, Sokka. Roku told me if I don't stop the Fire Lord before Sozin's Comet comes, he's going to burn *everything*." He had to look away. "But sometimes... sometimes I wish he'd never told me that." *It's not right. It's not fair. I don't like this. I don't like any of it!*

But Roku was his teacher. He had to keep going.

"Aang?" Sokka was quieter. Worried.

"Being the Avatar *sucks*."

"Yeah. I hear you." Sokka pulled him into a one-armed hug. "Wish we could have been in that fire chamber with you. Maybe if Roku saw you weren't alone in this mess, he could have given us some better advice."

"You think so?" Aang said hopefully.

"Hey, why not? Water Tribe. We've got a reputation." Sokka let go. "Come on. We'll get Toph to talk her hide-behind into hiding behind something else for a while."

"You mean you're going to try," Aang said, skeptical.

"Darn right. What else is family for?"

Agni, save me from family feuds. Huojin pointed toward the span of the hull. "You, over there." Pointed toward a niche of boxes. "You, over there." Laid a deliberately heavy hand on the loudest yelping citizen. "You? Come with me."

A rising babble of protest. Corporal Shoni glanced at him, and Private Rikiya had a particularly disturbing grin.

"I *will* hear each of you, separately." There was a trick to pitching your voice to cut through hysterical people without shouting them down. Captain Lu-shan was good at it. Huojin was... well, he hoped he was passable. And he was very grateful for a few borrowed marines for backup. *I miss you, Captain. A lot.* "We are *going* to sort this out, if I have to get the general and his tea down here to do it."

That caught both fuming families and the yammering onlookers off guard, as he'd known it would; promising a chance to preen instead of cause trouble. Good.

"But if we *don't* sort this out," Huojin went on remorselessly, "we might have to call down the prince and *his* tea, instead."

...It wasn't really silence. But the complaining died down to almost a whisper. He could see people sweating.

Heh. You make a mean smoke-sugar, kid. But everybody knows about your tea.

Blame Amaya for that. The healer had tried to keep her student up on his lessons, between all the rest of his plotting, planning, and scattering snow over Captain Jee's decks. And that particular one was driving her to distraction. Healing was as much about herbs as bending, and Amaya apparently could *not* figure out how a young man who could time an herbal decoction to the second of most potency couldn't brew tea regular people could drink without flinching.

Having once made the painful mistake of accepting a cup from Sergeant Kyo's marines, Huojin thought he could guess. It was... bracing.

Unfortunately, Amaya had expounded on it to Iroh. In detail. In what she apparently thought was private.

Only as a wincing Private Sukekuni had explained, when Huojin had asked what the problem was, nothing in a ship's corridors was private. Inside your quarters might be, if no one heard it through the bulkhead. A few other places on the ship. The showers, surprisingly enough; everyone could see everything, but no one would *admit* seeing anything.

Which seemed to be the only thing that got their prince through the day, sometimes. He'd seen Guards with less scars.

Sorry about bringing up the tea, kid. But at least it calmed them down. "All right," Huojin said to Chuanli; a fussy nit-picker of a builder, good for laying stone but not for being trapped in a big metal box for weeks. "What's this whole mess about, anyway?"

Several arguments, a few amused marines, and a girl's outburst of tears later, Huojin trudged back into his family's nook. Stepped carefully around Lim and Daiyu's patty-cake, and sagged dramatically to the floor.

"Daddy!"

Ah, buried in hugs. All was right with the world. "Everybody staying out of trouble?"

"Um..."

Uh-oh. But nobody was bleeding. And real trouble would have the Wens in from just a few feet away. Huojin pried open an eye, asking Luli a silent question-

Oh. "New hairstyle?" I am so dead.

"Meixiang is dealing with Jinhai." Luli looked ruefully amused, shaking out hair that now just brushed her shoulders, without ornaments.

"Ah." If he paid attention, he could hear murmurs that way. Interesting, how you got into the habit of not listening to your neighbors.

"It wouldn't have been so short if he hadn't insisted he could even it out," Luli observed.

"Right." Huojin looked at his daughters. Who were trying to hide suspicious grins. And failing.
"What did you do?"

A pair of innocent blinks. A likely story.

"Meixiang offered them the chance to cut *his* hair," Luli said dryly.

The grins got a little wider.

Huojin sat up to look their girls over, fairly sure who'd been the ringleader. Both of them looked like nice, sweet little girls. And Daiyu really *was*.

Lim? Not so much.

"Okay, precious. Give."

"We said we'd *think* about it," Lim said, all wide-eyed innocence. "'Cause Mom and Dad say you should always think before you do something crazy."

Huojin tried not to snicker too much. "He's not going to sleep tonight."

"Nope!" Lim bounced on her toes. "Just like you do in a 'terrogation!"

"Shh!" Daiyu had a finger to her lips. "Don't give it away!"

"Wouldn't dream of it," Huojin said solemnly.

Luli stifled a laugh.

Darn. She's onto me.

Then again, she always had been. Which was why he loved her. Looks were fine, skill with jade was definitely a plus to a family - but someone who understood? Priceless.

"So what was the problem this time?"

"Oh brother." Huojin debated collapsing back on the floor. Nah, he was tougher than that. Maybe. "The *argument* was over a comb. Boy One gave it to Girl One, Girl Two says he promised it to her, Girl Three - who's his sister - swears it looks like something that went missing from her cosmetics box... and after a few rounds of this we find out she was seeing Boy Two, who the family does *not* approve of, and *maybe* she gave it to him..."

"Ouch," Luli agreed.

"The *problem* is, we've got too many people jammed into a steel can, and at least another week to go," Huojin sighed. "Lee did this for three years? No wonder he's-" *Kids are listening, Huojin, pay attention.* "A little odd," he finished.

"Maybe we could make the ship stop and get off?" Daiyu said hopefully.

"Not yet," Luli said firmly. "If we stopped, we'd have to get everybody back on, and you know what happens when you help me pack and unpack our things, right? Things get lost, and they take time to find and," she barely hesitated, "we just don't have the time. Not yet."

Daiyu's face crumpled a little, but she nodded. Huojin hid a wince. They'd tried not to tell the kids the whole, ugly truth. No kid needed to know there were people out there who'd kill them just for

being born. But that the war that had been on the other side of the Walls was here, and real as any monster under the bed... yeah. They knew. They were trying to be brave; really, really trying to be the best little girls they could be until the war went away again. And he was *not* going to get mad and hit something. First, he was a Guard, and even if you were born outside Ba Sing Se, you did not let your temper get the better of you.

Second... the people who *needed* hitting weren't here.

"Don't worry," he told his girls instead. "I know captains. Jee's going to do everything he can to get us off this ship as fast as possible."

Not that he wanted to even breathe to his daughters why. Cabin fever was bad, but probably survivable. Coming under attack from the Fire Navy while he still had civilians on board? That had to be near the top of Captain Jee's nightmare list. Right under being blown apart by a volcano.

It worried him that they *hadn't* been attacked yet. From what Huojin understood of the messenger hawk system, every officer on this coast ought to know *Suzuran* was a target. Something he'd finally managed to nerve himself up to send in a note to Zuko, given catching the kid with two spare minutes to himself was about as likely as walking on water-

Someone cleared his throat outside the doorway. "Guard Huojin? May I come in?"

"Lieutenant Sadao?" Huojin stood; Sadao was probably a decade younger, but he was second in command of the ship. "What brings you here?"

Sadao held up his note. "The prince knew most of what you asked, but he's not up to date on the most recent communications protocols, so he asked the captain. And Captain Jee pointed out that if you're wondering, a lot of people probably are. And people from Ba Sing Se respect the Guard." He smiled at the girls. "Um. Hi."

Lim gave him her mother's *considering* look. Daiyu's eyes went wide at the armor, before she hid her face against Huojin's chest.

"Daiyu!" Luli scolded. "I'm sorry, she's young..."

"No, no, it's okay," the lieutenant said quickly. "My baby sister, Haruko - she was just that age when I left for the Army. It's good for children to be wary of outsiders." He smiled a little. "She's got her own place in the glassworks, now. The last letter I had from Mother, the family just threw out some upper-class boy who was trying to talk her into running off to the colonies... what?"

"You said the Army," Huojin pointed out. "This doesn't look like land."

"Story of my life," Sadao sighed. "There was a paperwork mix-up, and... trust me, you don't want to know."

Oh, but I do, I really do, Huojin thought. That was a problem with Guards; curious as pygmy pumas. He'd thought Ba Sing Se won the gold for bureaucratic screw-ups. This sounded like the kind of story that might make Captain Lu-shan crack a grin. *So how do I get you drunk enough to tell it?*

"Anyway..." Sadao folded himself down to sit; a neat trick in armor. "Hawk messages are good, but they have limits. First, hawks only go to who they're sent to. It's not everybody who'd be looking for us. Just the officers. And most of them are going to be careful what they say. One of the Fire Lord's ships, in a mutiny? That's just not supposed to happen."

Okay, that kind of made sense. No one expected a Guard to be on the take, either. Which meant the rare times it'd happened, Lu-shan had threatened to rip the perpetrator's head off with his bare hands.

"Second, someone's got to send messages in the first place," Sadao went on. "Gaipan probably sent plenty, but before that?" He smirked a little. "Do you think Princess Azula is going to want to admit we took a whole fleet out from under her? She's the Fire Lord's heir. She's supposed to get results."

"Oof," Huojin muttered. "I'd be a little slow sending that report, too."

"And if she has sent in a report, people know who's on board," Sadao nodded. "You think anyone wants to be the lone ship against royal lightning-bending?"

Lightning. That was still a hard thing for Huojin to wrap his mind around. Fire wasn't scary enough? "Eep."

"And then there's the bounty hunters." Sadao grinned. "Now *that's* funny."

Luli gave him a measuring look. "Bounty hunters are funny?"

"Well... kind of, ma'am. The price on Prince Zuko's head? It's enough to get the *serious* scavengers after it. Guys like the Rough Rhinos, or worse. And people like that tend to have phoenix-eagles." Sadao saw blank looks, and elaborated, "They're about the only thing that can catch messenger hawks. If they get caught interfering with military communications, they're dead, but..."

Huojin added two and two, and had to grin himself.

"Even with all that mess, someone should have at least hailed us," Sadao said soberly. "So either there are spirits getting involved - I'm not going to count that out - or the ships we've come near have orders *not* to make contact."

Luli chuckled behind her hand. "You sound like they think mutiny's contagious."

"Ma'am, we have two princes on board," Sadao pointed out. "We have *fire-healers*. If anybody on those ships has ever even wondered if the war is wrong, if anyone's willing to risk their neck and their families because they believe in General Iroh, and General Jeong Jeong, and the prince - it *could* be."

"We're dangerous," Huojin said, stunned. "A freighter and a bunch of Earth Kingdom junks without even catapults, and *we're* dangerous to the Fire Navy."

"People have heard about Admiral Zhao hauling off Fire Sages because some of them were loyal to the Avatar," Sadao nodded. "If the Fire Lord knows the Avatar's alive, and if Princess Azula's made her report he does - yes. We are dangerous." He paused, uneasy. "Until the Fire Lord can put people under the command of someone they'd never dare be disloyal to."

"Yeah?" Huojin said warily. "Who?"

Rest. Be calm.

A thrumming in her blood. A delicate, subtle warmth, like sunlight moving across the back of her hand.

Rest. Be calm. You have been wounded, but all will be well.

Firm, without the stab of claws. Yet she knew the claws were there.

Rest. Be calm. Breathe-

Azula blinked. Painted metal overhead. Silk under her. The sway and scent of the sea-

"Azula!"

Pink. Gently comforting hands. Which were firmly holding her down from any sudden moves. Not to be borne.

But this was Ty Lee, and the airbender was allowed a few liberties. For now.

"Breathe. Slowly. Keep your heart rate down. I know you have the training." Seated by her bed, the white-haired firebender met her gaze, pale gold unflinching even as his whiskers twitched. "You came entirely too close to dying. Your Dai Li have worked a miracle to keep you stable, and I have healed the worst of the damage. But you are not wholly well. Not yet." A slow, rumbling breath. "Be easy. I did not mend your heart to kill you without cause."

Bolin was here, Azula noted, but his seniors were not. So there was trouble. More than just one unreliable lord.

Trouble... and a dark red shadow in the corner of her quarters. *Mai.*

Don't react. Feel as angry as you want. But don't give them anything. "Most would say you have more than enough cause, Shidan of Byakko."

The dry smile showed far too many teeth. "Good afternoon to you as well, granddaughter."

"So tell me." Gingerly - she could always knife him later - Azula allowed Ty Lee to help her sit up. Ankle felt intact; surprising, but useful. But something under her breastbone was sore, in a way that made her uneasy. *Careful. Move carefully. Reach for their fires. He's bound to Byakko, I won't be able to take him - but he'll underestimate me. Everyone does. And then I'll have Mai again.* "Why shouldn't I have you imprisoned for dealing with a known traitor?"

"Because you want to know who attacked you," Shidan replied, gaze never leaving hers. "And why."

I know what attacked me, you old fool-

No. Anyone who'd survived her father's suspicions this long was no fool. "Who, then?"

"Her name is Makoto of Asagitatsu. And she will be back to kill you." He glanced at Ty Lee. "And you especially, young onmitsu. The only thing Makoto hates more than the blood of Byakko is the blood of Air."

Asagitatsu. Her heart seemed to stutter. Old, old history; scrolls she knew Zuko had never seen. Some, her father had lent her. Others... well, if they left a lock she could pick, they obviously didn't mean to keep her out. "The Blue Dragon Mountain is a myth."

"A legend, deliberately lost." Shidan's expression did not change. "Asagitatsu exists, and is poised to erupt and slay once more. And while your father might welcome disaster that would weaken his enemies, you have traveled the Earth Kingdom, and the colonies. You know how much we would

lose, even if we evacuated."

Azula narrowed her eyes. "Oh, of course. You propose to buy your freedom with the *promise* of quelling another volcano." She smirked. "Even if it existed, the Fire Lord knows what you've done with one. He'll never let you take over two."

"I never said *I* intended to protect it." He matched her, smile for razor-edged smile. And fire - slipped aside.

They're afraid. They're afraid of him, just as they are of me. This isn't like Long Feng. If Shidan wanted Bolin... I'd have to fight for him.

He *wasn't* pushing at Bolin. She could feel that. But his fire wasn't letting hers near Mai, either.

He thinks he can hold loyalties, even when I stand against him.

...What if he's right?

Agni. It was so *odd* to see a naked killer in another firebender's face.

"I may wish to ward it, yes," Shidan went on. "But I have not the strength, nor the blood. Which is why Makoto attacked you."

Now we're getting somewhere. "Dragons aren't supposed to be stupid," Azula said bluntly. "Why attack me, when I didn't even know there was a volcano to stop? I am an heir of Sozin. She couldn't be sure she'd kill me."

"She never planned to." No mercy in pale gold. Only cool interest. "You, granddaughter, are *bait*."

How *dare* he suggest that. She was no helpless Earth Kingdom noble lady; she was Ozai's heir! She could *never* be bait-

Facts clicked together like painted shells. Azula drew in a sharp, angry breath. So Shidan didn't have the power? He lived on a *water volcano*. He knew its ways, and how a more powerful firebender might calm a mountain never tamed in living memory. Power was useless without knowledge. "She claimed to be one of our agents. She knew an onmitsu could find you."

"But I didn't!" Ty Lee gave her a beseeching look, wide-eyed. "No one knew where we were going. I was trying to keep you safe! His ship just - just showed up."

"Taking to sea was wise, were you dealing with an ordinary dragon," Shidan observed.

"Unfortunately, Makoto has powers beyond any the dragons have ever claimed." He shrugged slightly. "It is a gift of my blood, that I know when one of mine is near death. She knew wounding you would draw me out." He smirked. "Though I think her own rage may have caught her off guard. One of Sozin's line, willingly learning the bow? Choosing to protect an airbender? She must have thirsted to strike you down on the spot." His smile softened. "I am proud of you, granddaughter. You can see past your rage, to do what is necessary for your plans to succeed." A quiet sigh. "I am proud, and glad. Your mother was wrong. I do not have to kill you."

Azula closed her mouth, chilled. She didn't know what to say. She'd *never* not known what to say.

It's like looking into a mirror. How odd...

"Lady Ursa would never say that!" Ty Lee put herself between Azula and pale gold. "She's your mother, she loved you-"

"She loved Zuko," Azula said harshly. "Never me. Not ever me!"

Smoke, curling from her covers. Damn it.

"She loved you both, and she feared you both," Shidan said mercilessly. "And she was right to do so. Ironic, that she chose to fear the wrong child." He turned a palm upward, cupping dancing flames of gold and green between pointed nails. "But you were clever, and determined to survive. You knew Azulon approved of your skills, but not the viciousness your father smiled to see in his child. You knew, and you could not bear for the father you worshipped to cast you away for power. So when Azulon gave Ozai his orders, to destroy that which he loved... you lied."

He can't know. She would not let herself pale. *There's no way he can know.*

"Ursa... your father injured her too deeply for her memories of that night to be reliable," Shidan went on. "But Zuko? He remembers. How unfortunate for him that Iroh truly does love your father, despite everything. For all his wisdom as a general, when it comes to family? Iroh has not thought, and he has not *listened*. Azulon, slay Ozai's heir, when Iroh had just lost Lu Ten? Threaten the line of succession further? No." A decisive shake of head, white whiskers flared. "Not that man. Not the Fire Lord who planned that there *would be* a line to hold Byakko, and one indebted to the Fire Lord. But order Ozai to kill his *most favored child*..."

Ty Lee made a small, hurt noise. Even Mai looked pale.

Azula stared back at him, jaw set.

"*Azula always lies.*" Shidan's voice was far older; but for that moment, his rhythm was purely Zuko's. "Iroh does not listen, and he does not believe. I speak to him of dark dragons, I *tell* him the truth, and he cannot hear it. But Zuko knows you. And Ozai."

Azula took a breath, centering herself. "He wouldn't have done it. *I* was the true heir. He wanted me."

"So you wish to believe," Shidan nodded. "But whatever your beliefs, you are clever, granddaughter. Clever, and ruthless, and determined to survive. You saw a threat. And you acted. All it cost you was your mother... and your brother's nightmares."

Azula sniffed, smirking. Nightmares, indeed. As if that was the worst she'd ever done to her brother-

"Though that is the least of the harm you have done."

Damn, Azula thought, feeling her grasp after others' fire - slipped aside, yet again. How did he *do* that? It was like trying to parry your own shadow in water.

"You say I have cause to kill you? Oh, indeed. But if I was forced to abandon Zuko, bound never to venture near the palace, or the Fire Lord... how much more was I forced to abandon *you*?"

That... hurt.

Shidan crushed the flames in his hand, gaze locked on hers. "You were a monster, and you survived Ozai. I do not condone the monster. But I know the will to *live*." He pointed at the raw ache across her chest. "Iroh's block is clever, but risky. That you came as close as you did to performing it correctly is a testament to your skill, and your determination. In and down and up you channeled it, yes - but the lightning *must miss your heart*." He shook his head. "Through the stomach, granddaughter. A nail's thickness higher, and no healer of this world could have saved

you."

Fury crawled through her veins, thick and ropy as the capital's lava. "No *lies*," Azula spat. "You're Mother's father, and you act like you *care*?"

"I never lie."

Breathe. Don't set him on fire. Not yet.

"I am not one of your father's scheming lords." Shidan's lip curled, flashing fangs. "I have no loyalty save to Byakko, and Agni; no hunger for power, save what is needed to hold our island safe. Kotone and I run spies for the Fire Nation, and Azulon allowed us to do so, because he knew we held those loyalties beyond breaking." Pale gold watched her, a cat with a cricket-mouse. "Your father has been less brilliant. Or perhaps more confident that Makoto stood as his ally, without hates and wishes of her own. And indeed, she is *his* ally. But she is also allied with others, who bear humans no will but malice. If you believe nothing else of me, granddaughter, believe this: *Makoto is your enemy.*"

Azula's eyes narrowed. "Because of you."

"Indeed." Wry humor flickered in that gaze, tempered with something... darker. "I survived, when she very much wished me dead. I *escaped* her. Not once, but many times, over a very long life. I have taunted her with my survival, dashed it in her face as a thrown gauntlet. And how have you ever felt, when Zuko survived you?"

Furious. Outraged beyond bearing, as if gravity itself had turned traitor, and everything she grasped floated away like mist. She controlled her world, she predicted her enemies, and how dare anything merely *human* shatter her plans-

Fury. Soul-shaking rage. The hunger to destroy, to strike and strike again until even ashes were shattered into nothingness.

And all of that fury was coming for *her*.

"Help me up," Azula said through gritted teeth. At Ty Lee's stammer, "I have to stand!"

"She must," Shidan nodded. "Our only chance is to force Makoto to strike at a time of our choosing, instead of hers."

"Bait," Azula said grimly, swaying on her feet. "I assume you've told my guard your plans?"

"He didn't give us a plan, your highness," Bolin said plainly. "He just - told us what dragons can do. What Makoto can do." The man looked pale.

"I know somewhat of airbenders, but I am not the most versed in a Dai Li's strengths and weaknesses," Shidan shrugged. "You have no reason to trust any plan I might suggest. So I have advised on tactics. Strategy is yours. As would be wisest, in any case; I *have* fought Makoto before. She knows what I may do. You should be far less predictable."

Right again, damn him; she wouldn't have trusted any plan of Byakko. So he'd saved them both the time of arguing over it. Clever. "Agent Bolin?"

The Dai Li swallowed dryly. "We're trained to deal with spirits, Princess. But this... this is bad."

I'm scared.

She could feel it; though he never said the words, and likely never would.

"You're trained, and you know more about fighting dragons than anyone in the world, besides my uncle." Azula said bluntly. "We're alive. We're going to stay that way." *Believe. Believe in me, and in yourself. You are mine-*

Fire shifted. Bolin stood a little straighter. And Shidan watched with the fathomless patience of a predator.

I still can't touch Mai.

Shock might do what more subtle measures could not. "Whose side are you on?" *Declare for my side or his, Azula thought, and I'll have my excuse...*

"You can't lie to Makoto." Mai sounded almost bored. "You can't intimidate her. You can't manipulate her." A graceful brow rose. "This should be interesting."

Worried as she was, Ty Lee smiled.

Heh. She'd missed the razor of Mai's wit. *Strategy, Azula thought. I need a plan.* "Dragons breathe and control fire, and prefer to attack from the air. We don't need to sail with the wind, so she won't have as much of an advantage - engineers."

"Prepared to vent the boilers on orders, with firebenders to damp any blazes until it's done," Bolin nodded.

Good. Venting the boilers would put them dead in the water, but better that than blowing up. The coal supply, the auxiliary storage, and the catapult fuel; those were the major flammables on the ship. Control those, and she'd avoid unexpected attacks. Speaking of which... "You said she had other powers besides those of dragons." Azula glanced at Shidan. "What powers?"

The ship shuddered, vibration shivering through her feet like the scaled brush of a cobra-weasel against her throat.

"Water spirits." Shidan's gaze was distant; she felt his fire reaching carefully out, probing like whiskers-

"Get the men off the deck!" Shidan roared, bolting for the outer hatch. *"Isonade!"*

The hatch hurled open on horror.

For a moment, just a moment, Azula stood there gaping. Water spirits couldn't be real. That sea-wreathed curve of fin and barbed hooks, shedding waterfalls onto the deck, savaging anyone who didn't move fast enough, *couldn't* be real.

The moon going black, when there could never have been a natural lunar eclipse, and reports say Uncle committed treason to protect a spirit... that wasn't real?

Spirit or not, if the tail was that massive the creature had to be *enormous*, and if she controlled something that big against a ship-

Makoto's been in my mind. She knows I abide by Father's wishes. I am a firebender. First, last, and always.

Bony hooks slashed overhead, ringing off Shidan's steel and Bolin's stone, drenching them all with

chill seawater. Cold shook her like a lion-dog's jaws.

Douse our fires. Azula bit her lip against the cold burn in her chest, letting Ty Lee yank her clear. Make us spend our chi just staying alive. Weaken us, have the isonade tear the ship apart, and she won't need to fight. Just pick us off, one by one.

Brilliant. Exactly what she would do.

How do I fight... me?

Azula grinned, savage and joyous. There. So *clear*.

"Get me the blasting jelly!"

Chapter End Notes

Something that's always bothered me about that bit with the Southern Air Temple in "The Storm". Not only did the Elders blow apart Aang's whole life by telling him he was the Avatar early, they told *every kid in the Temple*.

Wow. Way to go, ancient wisdom. Ostracize a twelve-year-old from every peer he's got. On top of that, by not stepping in with the kids, you tell the Avatar - the guy who's supposed to restore balance to the world - exactly what you think "fair" is. Great idea.

Let me quote Oleg Atbashian here:

"If some people had wings and others didn't, and the government wanted to enforce 'fairness,' soon no one would have wings. Because wings cannot be redistributed, they can only be broken. Likewise, a government edict cannot make people smarter or more capable, but it can impede the growth of those with the potential. Wouldn't it be fair if, in the name of equality, we scar the beautiful, cripple the athletes, lobotomize the scientists, blind the artists, and sever the hands of the musicians? Why not?"

In the mindset of the Southern Air Temple, the only "fair" thing is for the Avatar not to play.

Compare that to the Fire Nation. Where you must fight, you must succeed, you must be prepared for an Agni Kai if you're a firebender. Fair doesn't come into it; as we saw with Avatar Kuruk and a guy out for groceries, anyone can challenge you at any time.

If Sozin hadn't started the war, the attitude the Elders were inculcating in Aang would have started one.

Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

Some dialogue from "The Painted Lady" in here. So just to be on the safe side - Avatar is owned by incredible people who are definitely not me.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Water was flowing, yet water was dying.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. The breath she took in the headwaters, tumbling over granite and obsidian, should have been renewed by slower sips along her winding track; skirling eddies, the in-breath of shelled life, the splash of fish. She should have rejoiced in her people, laughing and playing pranks with nets as they fished and swam.

But she was ill, and they were ill, and all were dying.

Where is Jang Hui's lord?

Lost and gone, feverish memory reminded her; to greed, to death. The clans remaining were helpless, humans weakened beyond her fragile power to mend.

Where are my kin-who-were?

Lost and gone, felled by Sozin's orders. Some wings yet flew, she sensed it - but few and far. Agni's eyes and ears were not *here*.

Where are the firebenders? Where is a Sage to hear me?

None to be found. War had swallowed the benders with their lord, and all Jang Hui had left was poisoned hope. No one had the power to draw her forth...

My name.

She heard it ruffle the river. Felt it thrum through the town pilings, as power moved. Shivered, as it lingered like a mantle cast about one who was not *hers*.

Who dares?

One night, she might endure, enraged. Two, even, she might have suffered, to let a little mortal fool escape with but a warning. Three-

The mirror was ice, was water, was *her*. She looked into a painted face and alien blue eyes.

You claim to be the Painted Lady? I accept.

Breath. Heaviness of bone and muscle, lacking the fluidity of water. A scream of terror in the back of the human's mind. "Hush."

A young voice. Hmph. Old enough to know better, no matter what protests now rose from a trapped mind-

Oh. How very, darkly amusing. "I am a Fire Nation spirit, so I cannot be real? Silly child."

Rage and fear and *demanding*-

"Hush," the Painted Lady said firmly, taking her first steps in borrowed flesh. "I am a *river*. I have no wish to be you. *You* took my name. *You* took my place. So now *you* will help me mend my ills. And then you and yours will *leave*, or I will blaze your invasion from here to Shirotona."

Affronted outrage.

"You were trying to help?" The river spirit hissed, water lapping sand. "Then help. As a *human*. My *name*, foolish girl! It binds me, it is bound *to* me, as your flesh and bone are to you! As well skin your own brother and wear him for your robe. How *dare* you? I could plunge you to the river bottom to drown, and no spirit would say I had done anything but justice!"

Fear. Disbelief. And again, fury.

"Oh? What else should you expect of a Fire Nation spirit, hmm?" She reached out to the water, testing the power this bender carried. Yes; it might be enough. "Tell me. What did your spirits do, when they were offended? Were they gentle and forgiving? *I* hear otherwise."

More outrage. She walled it off. If she truly did not wish to harm this girl, she should not lair in this body too long. She *knew* the poison's source. Time to end this.

"Hello, Painted Lady spirit!"

Human. Yet not. Was the boy another possessed soul?

I want no interference. Summoning the water that was herself, she danced upstream. Toward human-made venom, born of hate.

Wind rattled behind her, carrying shards of words. "Excuse me... friend's sick... Hei Bai..."

The *thwack* of flesh against a roofpole made her giggle. Chase her at night over her own river, would he?

Touching down on the riverbank, she paused to judge exactly where the factory was. Human flesh felt distance far differently than a river's flow-

"My name's Aang." The young boy grinned at her. "I'm the Avatar."

The Avatar. She drew a borrowed breath, water curling up from the river around her. "*Where have you been?*"

He rocked back on his heels. "Um... I was frozen in an iceberg. And... I guess you're mad. A lot of people... spirits... are." He braced himself, and faced her squarely. "But I'm here now. I'm going to defeat the Fire Lord. We'll stop the war."

"Defeat the Fire Lord? You *created* the Fire Lord." Human eyes needed to blink; she let water sink down halfway, considering the spirit before her. "Agni has not forgiven you that."

"But I didn't do that! Avatar Kyoshi did. You can't blame me for what I didn't do!"

"I did not say he blamed *Aang*." There. She could taste the factory in the water. "I have no time. Mortal life depends on my speed."

"It does? Where? Wait, let me get my friends! Katara's a healer, she can help-" He stopped, gray eyes wide in disbelief. "Katara...?"

She smiled; a borrowed, dark smile. "So that is the mortal who stole my name. You should have warned her, Avatar. I run even to the sea - and the waves that washed our dead tell me you know better than anyone, spirits are not *safe*."

He fell into an airbending stance; hesitated, apparently realizing violence might not be the best answer. "Let her go!"

"I cannot." The Painted Lady kept her words simple, almost gentle. He was the Avatar, but the human in him was a child. "She has affronted me. She stole my *name*. I must have my revenge."

"She didn't mean to!"

She cocked Katara's head, lifting the veil with a painted hand. Letting him see how much was *not* paint, but a spirit's power spreading into mortal flesh. "Avatar. You told the Fire Nation long ago, *intent* means nothing. You *bound* us to that. I *must* have my revenge." She tried to soften her voice, and pointed upriver, toward the factory. "If I am able, I intend to take it there."

"...You want to destroy the factory?"

"It is what your mortal friend intended, before she stole my name the last time." The Painted Lady stepped out onto the river, flexing a waterbender's power so the surface held under her footsteps. "When this is over, be certain it *is* the last time. You declared the Fire Nation merciless and cruel, Avatar. Even Agni can only soften your curses so much."

"I didn't-!"

She looked at him, unblinking, as the rolling river bore her up. Earth smothered. Water drowned. Fire burned. "You are the Avatar."

And she had work to do.

Ground by a sick river, Toph thought queasily, patting her earth tent back into said grassy ground, or up in the air on Appa. Decisions, decisions.

Up in the air was sounding better all the time, though. Aang would take Appa's reins, which meant Boots could tiptoe and squeak around her in the saddle. As long as he did it quietly. The little spirit was *very* quiet, these days.

She was as mad about that as she was about Katara. Only nobody else seemed to get what Aang had almost done to Boots, and Katara seemed to think *Aang was upset* covered *everything*.

Resting her hands on the wiry leafiness sprouting from the earth, Toph tried not to get mad at that all over again. Instead, she wriggled her fingers in dewy blades, listening to the perky sounds of birds near dawn, as she felt down through earth to bedrock.

Even the rock's different here.

Earth Kingdom rocks felt like rock. Solid, or wispy with wind like sand, or soaked with water in limestone. These rocks felt like *fire*.

Not fire here and now. But had-been fire, once-was fire. Like glass, and heat, and a ringing crystal

tingle she'd only felt so deep she'd never had a name for it before.

Fire and sand and glass. Darn it, she *missed* Sparky.

Tao's got to be wrong. He's got to.

She was *not* going to lose Zuko to some stuck-up spirits' ideas on what people should and shouldn't bend. No way. Bring 'em on; she'd show those spirits what it meant to take on a *real* earthbender.

Besides, Tao had to be wrong. Zuko'd told her straight out: he hadn't been *trying* to bend water. Not even as much as she had, poking at the salt in the sea. The moon had drowned him first.

Sparky's gonna be okay. He's got to be.

A season, the shaman had said. She had to grab Zuko before the end of summer. She had to prove Tao was wrong.

But Sozin's Comet was coming, and the eclipse was coming faster, and helping Aang had to come first. Darn it.

What really got to her was, she was pretty sure Zuko would agree with her. The sooner the war stopped, the less people would die. And if the war did stop, and they helped Aang stop it - maybe they could head off that nightmare Zuko had slashed them with, about what Earth and Water wanted to do to his people.

He believed it was going to happen. She'd felt that, to her bones.

Not if I can help it.

Toph pushed at fire-touched stone, and felt how it pushed back. Every rock had its own particular twist of Earth's stubbornness. Some were solid strength. Some a gliding resistance like sheets of mica. Some had the brittle tension of a fracture zone. Only these rocks-

"Great! Both gone!" Scrubbing at his eyes, stumbling in what must still be dark, Sokka snarled at the camp in general. "I tell Aang not to sneak off anymore, and what happens? Katara starts sneaking off. So either she's sneaking off *for* him, which is not what I had in mind, or - what the heck is she doing? We can't get noticed before the invasion. Sure, Aang's the Avatar, but there's a lot more of these Home Guard types than I thought. If even some of them are firebenders like Teruko - what are you doing?"

"Feeling rocks," Toph said, matter-of-fact. *Duh*. "They've got to be on the river or miles from here. And they've been gone a while. Ground under their sleeping bags? Not warm."

"Nice trick," Sokka said thoughtfully. Flung up his hands. "Gah! What are they *doing*?"

"Sit down, Snoozles," Toph advised. "Wait 'til it's light enough. I can't feel them. We're gonna need your eyes."

"Good to be needed for something," Sokka grumbled. Flopped down by Momo's curl of fur, rousing a sleepy chitter from the lemur. Reconsidered, and sat up again, leaning toward her. "What are you up to with the rocks?"

Toph grinned at him. Too bad *he* wasn't the guy she had to teach earthbending. Sokka wanted to know things. Aang never asked about stuff. "Bet you think earth is earth, right?"

"Umm..."

"Well, kind of. I could throw boulders around all day. But if I wanted to do something fancy, like get you out of a crack? Earth Kingdom rocks break in layers, like this." She waved flattened hands across each other. "This stuff? Breaks a lot more like glass." She flicked fingers out, miming shattering. "So I'm poking at it first. Before I have to do anything tricky."

"I am so glad we added you to the group." The way Sokka rolled his shoulders told her he was grinning. "Nice to have somebody who doesn't make me panic half the time." He shifted, the sound of his voice aimed a little to the side. "Or talk me out of talking to him. Darn it."

"Lying without lying?" Toph tried not to smirk. Aang's excursion into a Fire Nation school had been nerve-wracking for everybody.

"Arggh." Sokka buried his head in his hands. "Yeah. That."

"Gotta admit, books don't do much for me," Toph said. "So maybe I don't get what the mess is."

"Not sure I do, either," Sokka admitted. "Wish he'd grabbed one of the books. Maybe I'd feel different if I saw what they said about the Water Tribes. So Sozin screwed with history and wrote about conquering a big Air Nomad army that didn't exist. Hello? We knew the Fire Lords were bad guys! We know they want to send those kids - darn it, they're *kids!* - out to kill people." He blew out a breath. "I hate to say it, but... I don't think they could do that if they thought *they* were the bad guys."

Toph frowned. "Not sure that's what's getting to him."

"No," Sokka agreed, tensed and thoughtful. "No, I don't think it is. It's like he thinks teachers always know what they're doing..."

Toph wiggled her toes in grass, waiting for Sokka to put whatever had popped into his head together.

"No," Sokka said at last. "It's not that simple." He brought his knees up, leaning on them as he lined up his words. "What he says about the temples? Kids had to listen to teachers, and everybody had to listen to elders. Outside of that, everybody did what they wanted."

"Yeah, right," Toph scoffed. Paused, taken aback by Sokka's steady pulse and breath. "Seriously?"

"Aang says Zuko didn't *want* to burn our village down," Sokka said bluntly. "Which means when he said he'd do it anyway, he had to be lying. Even when Aang thought he was telling the truth."

Toph made a strangled noise.

Sokka nodded. "That's pretty much what I said."

"But- that- he-!"

It fit, darn it. Aang trained as long as he wanted to train, then he was after butterflies. He helped who he wanted to help, he went off on vacations when he knew he had to master the elements by the end of summer...

And wasn't that part of why she'd run off with everybody in the first place? No parents wrapping her up in cotton like a glass doll. Nobody telling the greatest earthbender in the world what she *couldn't do*.

But there's a difference between can't do and shouldn't do, Toph thought. A big difference.

A difference she'd had pounded home by a humongous spider-squid-thing. Blind didn't mean she couldn't play with water. It *did* mean she ought to bring someone with eyes. To watch out for the man-eating monsters she *couldn't see*.

"I think what's getting to him," Sokka went on, "is that a hundred years ago, people here had to know the truth. The Fire Nation had to know there wasn't any Air Nomad army. But the books say there was."

"You're saying, he thinks the people who wrote the books *wanted* to lie about it," Toph guessed.

"Not just the books," Sokka said soberly. "All the parents, and grandparents, and everybody. Even Kuzon went to work for Sozin."

Toph snorted. "What was he gonna do? Take on the Fire Lord all by himself?"

"Yeah. I guess he didn't *want* to do that," Sokka said sourly.

Oh. Oh, *ouch*. "So Katara's kind of right," Toph realized, stunned. "If she didn't want to listen in on Tao, she just had to... Aang thinks that's like lying." Her stomach grumbled; she headed for where smell and weight on the ground told her Katara had stashed a bag of berries.

"Yeah. And now they're both gone... hey, where'd that come from?"

"Katara got 'em yesterday," Toph shrugged, munching.

"And she didn't share? Man, some sister."

"Says the guy who brings back Dock's clams instead of hunting for some *real* meat." Toph stuck her tongue out at him.

"Yeah, well, Aang gets upset when I- why is your tongue *purple*?"

This is bad. This is really, really bad.

Blowing up the factory? Sure. Great idea. Watching a spirit move in under Katara's skin? *Awful*.

He'd tried asking. He'd tried demanding. He'd tried *begging*. He was the Avatar. The spirit of the whole *world*. He wasn't supposed to let stuff like this happen!

And none of the stuff Tao had told him about reminding spirits of justice and balance worked. None of it.

"*She had no right to use my name,*" the Painted Lady had snarled at his last try. "*You seek justice, Avatar? Better for your friend if you do not! She is naamacaura! Justice would be her drowned body washed ashore, liver eaten, to show all I am not mocked! Ask Tui and La, if you think I lie.*

"*But your friend is fortunate. I was once other than a river. I remember what it was to do kindness. As she sought.*

"*So bury your pleas. And I will bury my justice.*"

Looking back on it later, he was surprised he'd been surprised. The inside of the factory did kind of smell like blasting jelly.

BOOM.

Whoa, smoke. And wind. And lots of smoke. And a strong hand grabbing him by the collar, dragging him clear.

"A-Aang?"

Faltering voice. Paint flaking off skin. Confused blue eyes. "Katara!"

She held him close, shivering despite the flames rising behind them. "I was - I was inside it, I could hear you. I just couldn't get out..."

"I'm sorry!" Because he was, he really was. He was the Avatar, he was supposed to fix things. And he couldn't keep one spirit from hurting the best person in the world. "I'm so, so sorry..."

"Less sorrow, Avatar. More thought."

He knew who that unearthly voice was, even before Katara went rigid. Letting go of her, he glared at moon-shimmer and painted skin. "You're not going to hurt her again!"

"No. I have had my revenge." A floating step forward, that somehow never left the water's surface. "You are brave, thief. Agni favors courage. And you meant to help my people. So live. *Do not steal from me again.*"

Katara blanched.

"You..." Inhuman eyes narrowed at Aang. "You are not nearly as brave as you think, Avatar. Life-stripper. Assassin of clans."

Okay, now he was starting to get *mad*. "I keep telling you, I didn't kill your people! Kyoshi did."

"As the Ocean moved without your bidding, to rend and slay? *He* says not." She stepped backward on the river, mist rising about her. "Every dawn, Agni looks down on the death of his people. He does not forget."

"Dragon," Katara blurted out. "You weren't always a river. You were a dragon." Still shaking, she pointed through fire-shot darkness toward the village. "How can you still care about them? After what they did?"

A shadow in mist, the Painted Lady halted. "Once, they lived and died with us. But *you*..." A painted finger rose, claw-tipped. "You had not the courage to face Fire's children. So you stole from them, Avatar. You *stole* what let their clans and ours be one. Now even the strongest fade and die, like flying sparks.

"But you kept the gift for yourself."

Mist faded, and the river was empty.

"What was she talking about?" Aang said, exasperated.

Katara tugged on his arm. "Aang-"

"I know I'm supposed to be the bridge between the living world and the spirits, so why can't one of them *talk* to me? Without going around in circles? I didn't steal *anything*-"

"Aang, let's *go*." Something cracked in burning rubble, and Katara flinched. "Let's just get out of

here."

Yeah. Good idea.

Scrambling with Katara back down the riverbank, Aang couldn't help but grin. The factory was ka-blooeey, the village was going to get better, and this was going to be a *great* story!

Too bad, Sokka. You missed all the fun!

Schedule thrown off, Katara lying about Appa being sick with tongue-purplizing berries, sister possessed by angry spirit, and now village about to be burned to the waterline by Fire soldiers. Sokka ticked them all off on his fingers as he watched jet skis close on the village. "The universe hates me."

"Plan would be good," Toph muttered, standing a little closer than usual.

He couldn't blame her. Everything was happening on the water, which meant her only warning if somebody lobbed a fireball this way would be everybody *else* ducking. "I'm working on it..."

"It's not fair!" Aang was glaring at the river, wind rippling sludgy water. "They believe in you! They trusted Katara to help because they thought she was you! Why won't you help them?"

Katara edged back from the water, and Sokka tried not to growl. "Aang. You guys just got away from that spirit. I don't think you want to wake... her... up..."

Mist rose, and he forced himself not to run.

She's pretty.

But not human. He could see it, the same way he had in Yue. Even if she hadn't been transparent.

Wait a minute. Hei Bai and Wan Shi Tong were solid...

She swept them with a glowing gaze, and held out a hand. Beside him, he felt Katara moving forward-

Oh hell no.

Moving fast, Sokka grabbed the spirit's hand.

...Okay, not my best plan ever...

The world went foggy, all his muscles going limp. Like strength was flowing out of him, into the gripping fingers that were... becoming more *there*. Smoke, instead of translucent mist.

A whisper tingled his ears like spring rain. *Tell the Avatar...*

"She's still sick, Aang," Sokka managed. "She used up a lot of power helping you blow that place. She can't... I don't know, *reach* here, without some help..."

Jumping in, Aang grabbed the Painted Lady's other hand.

Oh good, Sokka thought, as the spirit shimmered into presence and the exhausting drain stopped. Maybe I can fall down now...

Toph grabbed him, bracing him as the Lady let go of his hand. "Don't pass out on me now, Snoozles."

Brave words, but he could hear the tremor in them. "You okay?"

"I can see her."

"But she's on the water... whoah. Is it that sludgy?"

"Not with my feet," Toph said tightly. "I *see* her."

Yipe.

"I have never been a strong spirit." The Painted Lady's voice was mist and water-trickle, oddly louder near Aang. "In times of need, they would send a Sage to lend me strength. None have traveled here in a very long time." Inhuman eyes regarded Aang. "You called."

"The villagers need your help," Aang said quickly.

Painted brows rose. "They have not asked for it."

"That didn't stop you before!"

"Night, and mist, and mortal invaders to take the blame." The Painted Lady did not blink. "Yes. Before, I walked."

Sokka gulped. "Mortal invaders? Um, guys... I think she means *us*..."

Her smirk flickered like moonlight on water.

"Yep," Toph said under her breath. "She means us."

"Daylight, and witnesses, and you wish to pass unnoticed," the spirit continued, implacable as a flood. "Walk? And have them believe me more than legend? No."

"Yes!" Aang insisted. "If they know you're here, they'll stop hurting you!"

"Young." Inhuman eyes narrowed. "If the legend is known as truth, Fire Sages will seek me." She tossed her veil. "I am the river! I will not be bound!" A wave of a hand pulled mist around her, and she stepped away from the world-

And was yanked back, eyes blazing, as Aang swept his arms over the water. "I am the *Avatar*, and I'm telling you-"

"*Vizvaasahantr!*" The sludge of the river seemed to congeal, as the spirit fisted clawed hands. "*Asmadruh!*"

"Get ready to yank up a wall," Sokka muttered toward Toph. "This, does not look good."

"Wait!" Katara's voice was still shaky, but she stepped toward the river anyway. "You're afraid. I know, I felt it. They hurt you. They could hurt you again. And the Fire Sages can do worse than that, can't they?" She shook her head, dark hair brushing her borrowed cloak. "But the Sages take their orders from the Fire Lord. And we're going to stop him. I know I didn't believe in you. All the horrible things the Fire Nation's done; how could they have spirits? But you're real." She reached out, touching Aang's shoulder. "All my life, I believed the Avatar would return. No matter what anyone said. And he *did*. He's here to help all of us."

"Brave thief," the Painted Lady murmured. "You, I would help." Her gaze shifted back to Aang. "But *you*... what hope do you offer spirits, child of wind? Serve you, or be bound? I am Agni's child! I defy your chains!"

"Whoa! Stop!" *Between a ticked-off spirit and an even more ticked-off Avatar*, Sokka realized. *Like I didn't learn with Hei Bai... think!*

Something he should have done *before* he got between these two. But when he'd moved, the spirit's fury had seemed so familiar...

Zuko. She feels like Zuko. In a really, really bad mood.

Meaning they were doing this all wrong. Sure, she was a river spirit; but a river touched by fire. Like Toph's rocks.

I'd better be right about this. "Aang. Stop pushing. I think she's loyal to Agni." Sokka didn't take his gaze off the spirit. "That's the problem, right? He's the Avatar. And you're not a strong spirit. He can *make* you help. But if doing that means going against what Agni wants-"

"Why would Agni want to stop her?" Aang pounced. "I'm trying to bring the world back into balance!"

"Why would the Fire Nation want balance?" Katara said bluntly. "They're getting what they want."

"No." The Painted Lady was still as deep water. "What we *want*, was stolen long ago. And every time we have neared it, every time we sought to restore ourselves - you have stolen it. Again. *Avatar.*"

"I keep telling you, *I* didn't steal anything!"

"Maybe you didn't," Toph put in. "What about Roku?"

Aang's head whipped toward her so fast, Sokka felt the breeze. "What?"

"Actually, I'm guessing Kyoshi," Sokka said, throat dry. "The fire-healers. That's why Agni's mad. Isn't it."

"Aamaavaasyavidha." She inclined her head. "You have a flicker of the flame. Seek further." A deliberate blink, and she regarded Katara. "I would help you. But I risk - much. If the Sages know I am more than legend..."

"They won't hurt you," Aang insisted. "We're going to stop the war."

"We can't promise that," Sokka said bluntly. "I don't know what Tao told you, but in the Water Tribe? You *never* give a spirit a promise you can't keep." He shrugged, deliberately casual. "But we've got a waterbender, an airbender, and an earthbender. And *somebody* told me, deception's legit when you're taking revenge."

All eyes were on him. Even glowing ones, under intrigued painted brows.

"So..." Sokka grinned. "Is there any way we can make this look like some *other* spirit got mad?"

The Painted Lady, Sokka reflected, had a truly wicked grin.

"Tell me, little thief," she murmured, like water running under ice, "do you know how to make a river run backward?"

"First," the Painted Lady had said, "we need the air to be still."

On the one hand, Katara wanted to rush into the village, where the general had already set one house ablaze. On the other - she hated it, but Sokka was right. The village needed more than just what she could do every night. They needed something that would last.

And she'd never, ever admit it, but it was kind of funny, watching the faces Aang made as he tried to get air to stand still.

But they're burning down the village! Who's going to notice there's no wind-

In the crowd, Dock jumped, staring wide-eyed at smoke rising straight up. Other gazes followed his, the crowd suddenly afraid of more than just firebenders.

"Then the ground must shake, strongly. As far as you can reach, little earthbender."

Katara had forgotten just how far Toph could make that. Ground rolled and swayed and *broke*, cracks reaching the river, filling with water. Her stomach lurched; she had to hang onto Sokka just to stay standing. On a slope above them, solid earth shivered into mush, sucking down rocks like quicksand.

"Now - and here I will help you, thief - we will pull the river back, toward the sea..."

It was like holding Appa's reins, if Appa was in a very, *very* touchy mood. She swayed sideways, and water *pulled-*

The river. She's helping me move the whole river.

Well, not all of it. But all the water in sight of the village had pulled away, leaving deep sludge bare to sun and breathless air.

And now there *was* panic; soldiers scrambling for jet skis, mothers after children, fathers clearing the path toward boats and ready to cast off ropes...

"And then, little thief, we will hold."

Oh spirits, it *hurt*, the water was too much-

"We will hold."

Too much - but this was water, and she'd promised-

"We will hold - until that coward General Mung moves, and I will have him!"

Sokka gripped her shoulder. "He's running, Katara! Go for it!"

Sweat blurred her vision, but she could just see red armor fleeing. Gritting her teeth, she *flung-*

The river roared. Katara felt it raging through her own veins, as if her heart surged in that torrent. Roiling water flooded backwards, and no town or boat could escape it...

A slender figure of mist and violet robes rose from the water. Pressed her hands together, like a wedge-

Like a firebender parting flames.

Water split and curled around Jang Hui, crashing back together to shred jet skis in a scream of steel.

"No!" Aang released his hold on the wind, breezes skirling off in the water's ebbing wake. "You didn't say you were going to kill anyone!"

"You did not ask."

Katara blinked, feeling water shift-

Mist billowed, and the spirit was beside them, a toe's breadth from the shore. "You helped craft the form of a tsunami, Avatar. Did you truly believe no one would die?" She lifted her hands slightly, and let them fall; river lapping gently up on the shore. "You seek for answers you should have within you. But if you cannot find them - there are those you might ask." Waves rippled up farther, carving eerie symbols in the sand. *"Asiheti suhasta milati..."*

There was more, a long, liquid utterance that sounded like nothing Katara had ever heard. But Aang blinked, and Toph and Sokka both tensed.

Wait. I have seen those symbols before. They look like - like the script on Zuko's letters...

"High Court," Aang blurted out. "Why'd you do that? We can't read High Court!"

"Do you not?" The Painted Lady glanced at him from under her hat, eyes dangerously mild. "The Avatar balances all the world. Or is that... just a legend?"

Wind blew, and only the river remained.

Chapter End Notes

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ naamacaura; stealer of another person's name.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ vizvaasahantR; destroyer or stealer of confidence.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ asmadruh; inimical to us.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ aamaavaasyavidha; belonging to the new moon.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ suhasta; skillful or clever with the hands.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ asiheti; swordsman or soldier armed with a sword.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ milati; find.

Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A dank stench of seawater and muck wafted over the deck as Jee's sailors set the dredge down in front of assembled benders and other purely curious onlookers. Mud, rocks, various clams and starfish... and familiar, eerie blue glinting in the morning sun. Zuko let out a breath, relieved. Well - kind of. Given what he planned to demonstrate, he was just glad the sailors were keeping the bystanders from getting *too* close.

"You've anchored here before," Captain Jee said in an undertone, standing beside him. "I trust your judgment on the bottom."

"Anchoring's not the problem," Zuko said, equally quiet. "Handling the anchor after you get it up - some people aren't going to believe this unless they see it." He stepped into plain view of the crowd, paying as close attention to where Langxue and Amaya were as to the firebenders. This was going to be interesting. "All right, everyone. What I wanted to show you-

"You can have ice under water?" Jinhai was on his father's shoulders to see better, not quite bouncing. "No way!"

"This is no ordinary ice," Iroh stated, eyeing it much as he might a sleeping scorpion-viper. "There are reasons the Fire Nation has had little interest in the coast near the Northern Air Temple, and they have very little to do with how short winter days may be."

"If your trainers covered this at all, they probably called it a hazard." Zuko pitched his voice to carry; they *needed* to hear this. "If we're not careful, it will be. But if we are... this could be useful." A slash of his hand broke a fragment off feet away; a beckoning curl of fingers, and the shard settled in his gloved hand. A sharp breath out-

Flames licked up from the highest edge of ice, blue and flickering yellow. Under the heat, water began to drip away.

"Fire-ice!" Langxue looked like someone had poured marine tea down his throat; awake and jittery. "I haven't seen that in... a long time."

Naval firebenders shifted, obviously recalling obscure warnings out of the mists of training. Jee cleared his throat. "As you can see," he said confidently, "in small quantities, it's reasonably safe. But if it fouls the anchor we need to chip it off. The usual techniques of melting large sections of ice away... I'm sure you can imagine what that could do."

"Fire-ice." Shirong cast a glance at Teruko before fixing his attention back on the chunk melting and burning in Zuko's hand. "You're burning water? How?"

"It's not just water," Zuko smirked. "How much do you know about natural gas?"

"Natural - oh." The Dai Li looked taken aback. "Guanyin's merciful veil. That stuff is *here*?"

"Large deposits abound in these mountains. Even leading under the sea, it seems," Iroh nodded. "When it bubbles through deep water, the fire-ice forms, and can lie there for centuries. Unless an unlucky ship drags it to the surface, and there is a spark."

"It takes a lot more than a spark to set it off," Zuko said, trying to head off ripples of unease in the crowd. "You have to melt it first, and you have to melt enough so there's gas in the air to burn." He flattened his palm, stretching the ice in rhythm with his fingers. Huh; didn't quite bend like pure water. Interesting. "I investigated this when we were searching here before." *But I couldn't bend water then.*

And now he could. He'd thought about that, back in Ba Sing Se; fire-ice, and desperation, and protecting his people in a dangerous world.

We fight with what the world gives us. And here... it gives us fire.

"Natural gas," Langxue said, half to himself. "The ever-burning fires of Asagitatsu."

"Ever-burning-?" Shirong's breath hissed between his teeth. "Of course! No wonder the Face-Stealer... a *natural* beacon for Fire Nation dead. Guanyin herself nurses fire here; it wouldn't take much for fire-spirits to intervene for those buried. With the fires out, the blessing would be corrupted, and-" His gaze fell on Jinhai, and the other young Wens. "...It'd be very bad."

"Not only Guanyin." Iroh smiled at Amaya, eyes warm. "You know we believe Agni La's brother. But long ago, it is said, Agni was also called the Grandson of the Waters."

"Grandson of the - a *fire* spirit?" Amaya said in disbelief.

Iroh inclined his head. "Today, I believe, we may show you why."

"Is the fleet in position?" Zuko asked Jee.

"More or less," the captain said dryly. "I did warn them what you had in mind. I don't think the other captains quite believed me."

Zuko almost grinned. "Some people just have to see it."

"See what?" Tingzhe Wen gave him a look askance.

"Asagitatsu will only be won by courage," Iroh declared. "It is time to tell her we are here." He stepped back, a circle of flame lighting around him, breathing with his breath.

Zuko matched his rhythm, reaching not for the fire within, but for the world without. There was water, and there the stirring of it that must be wind over waves, and *there* another stirring that whispered a promise of flames...

There, and there, and - Agni, so many!

Uncle's *kiai* seared away thin wafts of gas mixed with air, the great ring of fire blazing out to cleanse harbor air in brief, harmless flickers of flame. Zuko spun with that shout, gripping the strongest of those sparks, *twisting-*

Fire bloomed like panda lilies, a hundred licks of flame weaving from the waves.

Not a problem for *Suzuran*. But he really, really hoped the other captains believed Jee *now*.

"Fire on the waters." Amaya gripped the railing, staring at the sea as if she'd never seen it before. "Fire *from* the water... How will anyone know what to be?"

"I guess we'll just be what we'll be, huh?" Saoluan gazed over fire-wreathed waves with a smile that matched Teruko's for the promise of sheer mayhem. "That's the story Shidan gave us. We

didn't use to be different peoples. Just *one* people, with a lot of different games." She laughed out loud. "So what next, prince? Here's fire and water, but that's just half the balance. What are you going to do? Pull wind from a stone? Or - ooo, I know! - mountains from the sky!"

Zuko traded a glance with his uncle. And maybe he couldn't match Iroh's beaming grin, but he could definitely smirk.

Taken aback, Saoluan turned a slightly panicked look on Langxue. "Um. He's not...?"

The young waterbender eyed Shirong. Who was looking suspiciously at Teruko. Who was *trying* to look innocent. "Is that why you wanted us to bring the pumice, sir?" she asked.

Zuko's smirk deepened. "Lieutenant. Did you know Agent Shirong is under the impression that rocks can't float?"

"They *can't*," Shirong insisted, looking like he very much wanted to panic, if he could only think of a safe direction to run.

"Yes," Zuko said deliberately. "They can."

"So. The Avatar, and your brother, are still alive."

Kneeling in the shadows cast by the Fire Lord's screen of flames, Azula deliberately put certain things out of her mind. She would not think of that desperate battle against the blue dragon and her watery creatures. She would not consider the rumors now snickering through streets and palaces, of exactly what might have happened for the princess' vessel to limp into harbor a battered, half-sunk wreck. She would not even twitch at the thought of Mai and Ty Lee waiting in her quarters with the Dai Li, all desperately trying to pretend they were the loyal servants the Fire Lord would demand.

Above all, she would not wish for white whiskers, and a laugh, and razor-edged kindness.

None of that exists. There is only here. Only now. "I have no proof that they are dead, Father," Azula said levelly, head still down. "Both were gravely injured, but were last seen in the company of proven healing benders. For the sake of our nation, I will assume that the Water Tribe boy has managed to convince the more reckless of his companions to keep their heads down, and we must prepare for the invasion of a living Avatar on the day of the eclipse. An Avatar who will not only strike in our weakest moment, but may yet find some way to repeat that disaster at the North Pole."

Flames burned higher. "A disaster caused by your fool of a brother, and your traitorous uncle."

"Unfortunately, I've found information that may not be the case." Azula kept her voice even, tinged with disgust for treachery. "My most recent sources implicate Admiral Zhao, instead." Best to leave the main source in anonymous silence.

"He had my favor, daughter."

Dangerous ground. Well, she'd expected no less. "When he was tasked with the invasion, yes. However, Ba Sing Se's Dai Li appear to be as capable in spirit matters as our field Fire Sages. In their experience, spirit-slaying of this magnitude would have to be somehow linked to an offense by the official in charge." Now she did raise her head, expression cool and interested. "Given the fleet order of operations only lists General Iroh as an advisor, and doesn't list Zuko at all, I doubt even their most idiotic actions could have set that water-monster off."

Silence, save for the crackle of flames. An old tactic, but a good one.

Her knees ached from kneeling. Surreptitiously Azula warmed her hands, soothing away the worst of it. *I'm not a traitor, Father. I'm not - whatever Makoto might have told you.*

If the dragon had told him anything. Shidan might not lie, but he could have been deceived.

And Father knows I am his most loyal and ruthless servant. He knows that.

Yet if that were true, why leave Ty Lee ignorant of herself when Azula needed her? If only she'd known Ty Lee was an airbender when they'd first hunted the Avatar; the war might be over even now. The little monk had been lucky to date, but he was *fragile*. Vulnerable, in a way no one but another airbender could exploit.

Aang believes he acts for the good of the world.

That the Fire Nation was itself part of that world didn't seem to penetrate that shaved skull of his. But that was all right. Let him believe fire was nothing but evil. Then let him meet Ty Lee as she truly was.

I'll give you a dark mirror, little Avatar. Will you see? Or will you try to break it?

Best to be prepared if he did turn to violence. She would not lose Ty Lee to an arrogant little *idiot*-

"You encountered some difficulty in your return."

Damn. How could she have forgotten one of the first rules of survival? Never, ever get so caught up in your own concerns that you ignored Father. "I did," Azula stated, marshalling her thoughts. "It was interesting. None of my crew had ever encountered an isonade before." She allowed herself a smirk. "Then again, I doubt the isonade ever met blasting jelly before. And it won't have a second chance to improve its tactics."

"Blasting jelly."

Two words, and she wanted to cower on the floor. The very neutrality of his tone was a slap in the face. Fire was the superior element; firebending, the ultimate combat art. Well enough for ordinary soldiers to rely on tanks and drills and inventions. One of Sozin's line should be above all that.

"There wasn't time for subtle measures. I had to save my ship-

"Never," Ozai's voice knifed across hers, "did I think to hear Shidan's words from my own daughter's lips."

He knows.

It froze the marrow of her bones. She couldn't move. Couldn't *think*. Mai, Ty Lee, her agents - they'd never have betrayed Shidan's presence. They were far too smart to think they could escape her revenge. It had to be her crew. Hadn't she proved with Zuko time and again that low-ranked seamen were a weak point, willing to bend to anyone of higher rank? They'd talked, no doubt of it-

Breathe.

Breath was fire. Breath was control. And control was everything.

So Father knows. Move accordingly.

Easy to think. Almost impossible to do. Shidan had come for her because he'd known she was dying. Because he wanted her to live. He'd *healed* her. How could she say she'd just let a healing

bender walk away? Not out of gratitude, no, Father would never stand for that... but she doubted he'd like the real reason any better.

He risked his life for me. Like I did for Ty Lee. I risked my life, it doesn't make sense-

Only when Shidan's blades and fire had defended her, it did. There was something more than loyalty and vicious self-interest that moved people. Something she didn't have words for. Yet. But it was bright and sharp and *demanding*, like the skill that flung Mai's blades. And she wanted it.

It wasn't like firebending, or anything else she'd mastered by years of honing innate talent into perfection. It was different. Hard.

But Shidan had challenged her. He'd stood in her own cabin, knowing her strength, and *challenged* her inner fire. Blocking her with that brightness, that flexed and taunted and could not be destroyed, any more than she could shatter moonlight on water.

"Learn, granddaughter. And remember. We fought the sea itself, and lived. Not because we are stronger, or more cunning! Because we are.

"When our ancestors marveled at the flames, Agni saw the spark within us. He saw we lived, as fire lives; we spark and burn and die, as earth and air and water can never do. And so he chose us, and twinned that spark with his own. And in our ears he whispered, 'Be.'

"You are a firebender. Within you, you nurture Agni's spark. How fiercely you burn! But fire is only half your strength. Find the spark that is human, granddaughter; that is dragon, that is life. Find that, and you will never be defeated. Even in death."

Find the spark, the strength within herself. Believe.

"He had information too sensitive to risk passing through ordinary channels," Azula found herself saying. She kept her voice even with an effort, and hoped it was as true as it felt. Father would know if she lied. Father *always* knew. "There's a volcano in the north of the Eastern Continent that's threatening to get cranky. Byakko plans to send firebenders to calm it down again. He wanted me to be sure this was no move against our empire's interests."

True. She knew it was true. But who had told her? When?

And why did seeking after the memory of those words bring only a touch of warm hands and razor edges, comforting as the knives that let her sleep?

A ripple in the fiery screen. "And you believed him."

If she hadn't been awake, those words would have jolted her alert. That statement had more thorns than an orchard of rose-orange trees. "If I recall, Mount Shiroto is due for another few centuries," Azula said plainly. "They can divert some of their benders elsewhere for a time without endangering our islands."

Sparks snapped in the flames. Azula refused to flinch, but sweat prickled down her spine.

"Shidan of Byakko would save our enemies, and you think he does not move against the empire?" Ozai's laugh was dark. "You have much to learn, Azula."

Of course she did. She was only fourteen. Old enough to defend her own honor, and the empire's, but not old enough to have read every scroll in the palace library. Cunning and intelligence took you far, but there was something to be said for the accumulated weight of her ancestors'

viciousness.

Even so, she couldn't picture what she might be missing. "We have colonies on the northern edge of the continent," Azula observed. She'd been in Onsenzakura to capture Zuko and Iroh; the locals might not be as refined as citizens of the caldera, but they were loyal. "They expect us to handle such perils, or warn them in time to evacuate." She stared through the flames, face a calm mask over unease. "It would need to be a significant tactical advantage to counterbalance those losses."

This time, the silence felt smug.

This is wrong.

Honestly, why should she care if the northern colonies died? If their dying served a purpose for the empire, a useful purpose that would crush their enemies forever - it might be worth it. But to let Fire Nation citizens be wiped out by a volcano? Lords ruled because they bent fire; because they were Agni's children. Peasants gave loyalty because those lords had the power to protect them.

Allow our own people to die by fire, and everything we have built will be shattered.

Surely her father had considered this. There must be a greater goal. An ultimate strategy that would give the Fire Nation ascendance over all others.

Calm. You know the game. "I would be honored to have the benefit of your intentions, Father."

"You would be, indeed."

Just the slightest curl of disdain to his lips, audible in his tone. Azula cringed inside, as if a stone door had slammed on her fingertips. That was *no*. That was *fool*. That was *you are not and never will be worthy*-

What did I do, Father? What have I ever done to make you doubt me?

"Did you never wonder how Byakko found you?"

And everything in that question screamed of trap. But for who? "He's a spy," Azula shrugged. "That's what he does. I expect Mai will be even more useful, having had the chance to observe his methods."

Useful, to be sure. But to whose side? Mai had made it clear she would neither forgive nor forget Azula's manipulations in her relationship with Zuko. But.

"You're his sister," Mai had said, while they struggled to keep their ship from taking on water. *"He wants you to survive this war. And he's got a plan. You'd like it. Some of it's vicious enough even for you."*

"I'm here to help Zuko, and Ty Lee, and you. Because they care about you. And Shidan cares. He's a lot scarier than he lets the Fire Lord think. Trust me."

Interesting to have that confirmed now, by what Fire Lord Ozai was *not* saying. No sneers of Byakko's powerlessness. No contempt for a clan that held as much stiff-necked independence as it did only through luck and a water volcano's whims.

He's not saying anything, Azula realized. *He wants me to talk. To tell him what I know.*

And he hadn't mentioned Makoto at all.

Impossible. If he knows about Shidan from my crew, he has to know a dragon attacked us. A dragon! When they're all supposed to be dead!

Unless Shidan was right, and Ozai hadn't learned of Grandfather's presence from her crew at all.

No. It can't be. Father wouldn't lie. Not to me.

But he wasn't lying, was he? Not mentioning Makoto wasn't lying about her. Just as not mentioning Mai's heritage hadn't been lying to Zuko.

Father would never treat me like Zuko. He wouldn't!

Two options. Either her father was allied with Makoto, or he wasn't. On the face of it, *wasn't* seemed far more likely. Sozin's line had slaughtered dragons. Even Uncle Iroh. And Makoto had tried to kill her. Her father would never allow that.

...But she knew what she'd heard, six years ago. She knew.

I was a child then. Not nearly as useful. I am now, I took Ba Sing Se - I am the worthy heir!

An heir who'd only survived by earth and air and forbidden healing. Her life was balanced on a knife's edge, especially now that she'd delivered her warning of the Avatar-

Ice trickled down her spine. *Nawahime claimed to be our spy.*

And the first rule of spies was, never use information that could be tracked to only one source.

He wasn't surprised that the Avatar might be alive. He wasn't furious. He wasn't disdainful. He wasn't surprised.

She'd been *used*. A plausible source of information, to cover what Makoto had provided.

She let us get away!

The room was flashing red and black; Azula made herself breathe normally. Yes, Ty Lee had surprised Makoto on the beach. Yes, shards of stone had dealt serious damage to those wings. But dragons bent fire, *breathed* fire. And there had been no firebenders left on that beach to fight her.

That bitch!

The Fire Lord's heir, used as a stalking ostrich-horse to cover a dragon's trail. She'd never felt so angry.

Makoto used me for her own gains... and to hunt Shidan.

And that, Azula found, she could not forgive. There was *no reason* to kill Shidan. He'd been ordered never to approach the Fire Lord, or the palace; he was no threat to Sozin's line. He'd always acted, would always act, to protect Byakko. And Byakko was the last guard of the west; the farthest point to cry justice to Agni before the sun sank into the sea. Beyond their island was only untamed ocean, and they stood against the sea's power like their mountain itself.

Only a fool quenches the flame that guards him. I will not be threatened by fools!

Yet the Fire Lord was no fool.

He's still waiting.

Still silent. Not a whisper, not a crackle of flame to hint to her what Fire Lord Ozai wished to hear. She would be walking blind through a maze, praying with each word not to plunge to her doom.

So be it.

Words arrayed like Mai's hidden blades, Azula began.

...Sweat, dripping along her collarbone and spine, turning formal armor clammy and torturous with salt. Azula willed the discomfort out of her mind, stalking toward her chambers, a smile on her lips that made passing servants cringe.

One more corridor. Just one more.

She wasn't even certain, now, just what she'd said. Some plausible weave of Shidan's network observing messenger-hawks, engine speeds, winds, and currents, and from that calculating that if a message had come in *here*, the ship itself must be found in a specific area of *there*...

She'd dropped a significant hint that security in the naval yards needed tightening in the midst of that. After all, if the speed of imperial vessels was widely known - well.

A good stroke. It may have salvaged everything. One more door...

Ty Lee was on her almost before the door was decorously closed, babbling a pink mile a minute as Mai efficiently got her out of clothes and armor and into a broiling-hot bath.

Cold. I was so cold.

"Who do we need to maim?" Mai said bluntly.

Azula blinked, relieved to see her own hideout knives had been carefully placed in reach on the tub's little ledge. "No one. At the moment." Her eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Choose your words, Mai. You know we're being watched.

"I come from an ambitious clan," Mai said levelly. "It's good to be of service to our people. Where's anywhere better to work?"

...Oh, lovely. That was truly lovely. Almost poetic. Every word the strict truth. Azula had to smirk.

She wouldn't have dared say that to me before.

Which was actually... *interesting*. Loyal servants were valuable. But someone who wasn't loyal, yet wasn't actually an enemy; who had goals that ran in parallel, but weren't the same - it kept her alert. Kept her *focused*.

And if what she suspected was true, they were going to need all her focus to survive.

He won't let Makoto move against me. Not now. Not until after the eclipse, when the Avatar has been crushed.

But once Aang was in hand...

Calm. Control. And ignore the little whimper that wanted to climb the back of her throat, that looked at her father and wanted to beg *why*?

Why doesn't matter. Makoto wants me dead, and she's working with Father, and I...

I will not end up like Zuko.

There was one way to be sure. One piece of information she could learn, that would tell her once and for all if she was secure as the heir, or if she might be... expendable.

Sozin was over eighty when Azulon was born. Azulon was in his sixties when Father was.

Fact. And fact. She'd be a fool not to consider the possibility.

"I know it's been some time since either of you were in the city," Azula said casually, meeting gray and gold gazes. "But I was wondering. Have you heard any interesting gossip? Especially about... oh, gifts of cash. And silk."

Who's getting married? Who's negotiating it?

Put that together with a visit to the Dragonbone Catacombs, to check the Sages' records of family alliances, and she'd know.

You can't put Mother aside. You can't!

Ursa was banished. Ursa was legally dead. He very well *could*. She hadn't succeeded as heir this long by ignoring the facts.

"Could be fun." Mai tapped black-painted nails against a blade, scanning the bathroom walls for any alterations that might hide listening holes. "Can you balance on a clothesline?"

"Sometimes," Ty Lee nodded, obviously considering it. "Even if the line's not supported, there should be buckets and racks I can use. Good idea!"

"Clotheslines?" Azula said doubtfully.

"Ask questions while Ty Lee's putting on an act, they never know what they said later," Mai said plainly. "And if you want to know something... delicate..." A shrug. "You'd be amazed what laundry can say."

Azula stared.

Mai's hand moved, miming flat and silky.

Oh. *Sheets*. That was... um. More than she'd wanted to know. Eww.

You're the heir. Do what you must to survive. "Creative," Azula acknowledged. "We're going to need to be very creative in the next few weeks, ladies. Our nation needs us to be very, very useful."

A subtle warning. But from Mai's stillness and Ty Lee's nibbled lip, clear enough.

If we're not useful, we'll be dead. If Father thinks I'm not useful anymore...

Well. He was going to be wrong. One way, or another.

"Useless," Sokka muttered, knowing it would be lost in the thump of earth, the splash of water, the dying crackle of flames. "Way to let a guy pitch in."

Dispirited, he walked away from the bending slamming around the meteor, eyeing tiny licks of flame Aang and the girls hadn't gotten to yet. *Weird. You'd think dry grass would burn like tinder.*

It was burning; just, not the raging fire he'd expect in this crazy nation. More of a crawling crackle through the stems, leaf after dry leaf casually catching and flaming, rhythmic as Gran-Gran working hair off a hide-

"Fire and steel, boy! Just what do those young fools think they're doing?"

...It was a very *manly* eep. He'd swear that to anybody. Here he'd been thinking of Gran-Gran, and-

Well, she wasn't Gran-Gran. A little too tall and pale. Wrinkles not quite in the same places. And Gran-Gran would never have worn red and gold, or pulled her hair back with a red flame ornament. Or had the hilt of a *sword* peeking over her shoulder.

Okay. So he was staring. She had to be a grandmother; maybe even somebody's *great*-grandmother, she looked that old. And she was *armed*. It kind of made the world go sideways.

"Well?" She prodded his shoulder, just above the Fire Nation's weird armbands. "Speak up, cub. Water and earth, bending here? If the authorities catch you, you'll be up a frozen mountain with no sun, won't you?"

Gold. She's got gold on her robe hems. "Aren't... *you* the authorities?" Sokka managed.

"Heh. Heh heh heh..." Fists on her hips, she laughed, loud and clear as a talking drum. "So the cub has eyes. And can use them." She smirked at him. "Still waiting for my *answer*, boy."

What were they doing? Wasn't it obvious? "They're putting the fire out."

"In summer?" She looked as if he'd just offered her a rancid fish. "Why?"

"Um, town over that way?" Sokka pointed. "Night, nobody up, grr, fire, argh?"

"It's summer," the old swordswoman said dryly. "If you think their fire towers aren't manned, especially at night, you haven't been in the islands long enough. And if you think putting a summer fire *out* solves anything..." She narrowed her eyes at his friends, and drew in a breath that filled ancient lungs. "*Stop that now.*"

Water splashed to the ground as Aang and Katara stared. Toph let earth fall with a thump.

"Well. Manners enough to listen, at least." A wizened finger pointed at Toph. "You, earth-girl. Put that turf back, and mind you get it roots-side down. A grass fire's harmless, but if we start a ground fire, Shu Jing will skewer us all. And rightly so." Another jab. "You, waterbenders. Make yourselves useful and soak the roots before she lays them back. A spark underground can linger for weeks before it flares to the surface again, and I'm not going to be the one to impart that *joyful* news to the fire-watch-"

"Sokka, get away from her!" Toph stomped up a wall of earth between him and the white-haired woman. "She doesn't have a heartbeat!"

Say what?

"Clever girl."

Sokka backed away behind the dirt shield, watching what had seemed to be a stubborn old lady... *fade*.

Translucent now, the woman shook her head. "You still need to tend that turf, girl. I'm but a ghost,

wandering where I loved. Let a ground fire begin, and you'll wake far darker things than I could ever be." She spread empty hands. "This was my domain once. I would not see it harmed."

"Spirits can *lie*," Aang flung at her.

"Spirits, yes," the swordswoman said dryly. "I am a *ghost*, little waterbender. Your teacher should have taught you the difference."

A ghost. Sokka felt the hairs on the back of his neck going *straight* up. Spirits were spirits, and you never knew quite what they'd do, or why. Ghosts? They'd been people once. And, well - people could be downright *evil*.

"Um." Aang pulled out his *sure I know what I'm doing, trust me* smile. "I wouldn't say Master Pakku told us *all* about ghosts..."

Oh great, Sokka realized, heart sinking. *He didn't listen to a word of it.*

"You have Sokka's name," Katara broke in, swallowing hard. "Give us yours."

"One, for four to use?" The ghost looked almost amused. "Not a fair trade, little water-child."

"Sokka's name, and we do what you said to stop this... ground fire," Katara offered. "We'll trust you that far."

"Ah; now those are fairer words." The ghost nodded, satisfied. "In life, I was called Temul." She pointed toward a particular patch of turf. "Douse that one first. I can feel the spark in it."

Katara flicked water up from the ground, soaking it into the spot with a flattening wave of her hand. "Is it out?"

Gold eyes half-closed, and the ghost nodded. Toph frowned, but flipped turf back where it'd come from.

"You're just going to do what she wants?" Aang grumbled, waving up his own globe of water.

"She's someone's ancestor spirit," Katara said seriously. "Remember what Master Pakku said. We wouldn't see her if it wasn't important."

Sokka gave Temul a look askance, remembering awkward moments on a beach with *somebody's* hands fisted in his tunic. "I thought proper ancestor spirits showed up in family temples."

"Oho, been listening to the Fire Lord's propaganda, have you?" Temul smirked. "Think about it, young one. Not everyone is rich enough to have a temple, are they? So if the only living souls who can gain counsel from the dead are nobles... well." A sweep of her hand, toward the horizon. "It's so much easier to tell lies."

"The whole war is a lie!" Aang protested. "How can people not know?"

"Now that, little waterbender, is a long story." Temul nodded toward the ground. "Earth first. Perhaps we'll have explanations after." She chuckled darkly. "And if you think I lie, consider this. I'm *dead*. There's very little left the Fire Sages can do to me." A sharp smile. "They're not about to disturb Sozin's ashes so he can kill me twice."

Sokka stopped in his tracks. "You... Fire Lord Sozin?"

"As I said-"

"Long story, got it," Sokka sighed. "What the heck is a ground fire, anyway?"

Drifting along as the others damped and righted turf, Temul arched a white brow. "What does it sound like?"

"It can't be what it sounds like," Sokka argued. "There's ice in the... um." He looked down into one of Toph's deeper holes. "I keep forgetting you guys don't have ice down there."

"You must come from very near the poles," Temul mused. "So you've never seen grass fire. All you have on the taiga are crown fires. No wonder you're fearful of the flames."

"Hey, last time I checked? Stuff burning down, generally bad," Sokka shot back.

"Then come and watch. Come," she nodded to the others, as Toph snugged down one last soggy square of turf. "Let me show you life in the midst of fire."

Yeah, right, Sokka thought skeptically, one eye on the fires burning merrily closer to town fields as Temul drifted toward a darker forest. *If anybody's in those watch towers, they better get moving...*

Fire climbed a low bank at the fields' edge, and stopped.

Say what?

Katara stared through the night. Reached out, like feeling at a fur. "There's water behind that hill!"

"That hill's not a hill," Toph stated, head lifted in surprise. "People made that."

"So amazed, young ones? Did you think because we cannot bend it, we cannot use it?" Temul *tched*. "We are all Agni's children, gifted with fire or not. These islands are our home. We know them; fire, earth, sea, and sky. Especially the sky." Her gaze grew distant; the air seemed to ripple with heat. "Death comes as summer dies. Those who cannot read autumn's storms may lose more than their own lives."

Autumn, for airbenders. From the horrified look on Aang's face, Sokka knew things were about to go downhill fast. *Quick, think, do something-* "How does anything stay alive in the middle of that?" Sokka blurted, pointing at flowing flames.

Attention flicking back to him, Temul held a finger to her lips. Crouched down, and stepped noiselessly forward, pointing to black mounds where the fire had already burned through.

Funny looking black mounds, Sokka realized, as all of them tried to sneak closer. Two large ones, with a bunch of smaller ones so close they looked like chicks nestling up to an arctic hen-

Out of the black, fluffy yellow peeked out. "Peep?"

"Quack!"

"Turtle-ducks!" Aang pounced, handing Katara a squirming, yellow-fuzzed turtle-duckling with a soot-stained shell. "Why'd you let the fire go here? They could have been hurt!"

"Quack!"

"Hey! I just want Katara to see - ow! Quit it!"

Avatar mobbed by turtle-ducks. Sokka tried not to snicker. Really.

"They're not hurt." Katara rubbed a fluffy head with her fingertip, then put flailing webbed feet down. "Here you go, little mother... just look. They're not hurt at all." Her eyes were wide. "But we saw the fire!"

"A grass fire." Temul watched the little flock waddle off toward the hill, and the water beyond. "They burn fast, low, and cold. No, no; don't believe me. Put your hands on the ground and feel." She nodded toward Toph. "Or ask the one walking barefoot in the ashes."

Sokka gulped. They'd walked right after a fire, and Toph hadn't complained...

Biting his lip, he touched sooty ground.

Hot.

But just hot. Like stone in the summer sun. Not searing-hot like a wood fire, or even boiling-hot like cookpot water. Just hot.

"It's not wise for humans to walk into a grass fire. We're not as sturdy as turtle-ducks." Temul smiled wryly. "Watch the fire. See how it moves. What it likes. It won't eat rock or water. Even a patch of raked sand can turn it aside." She gestured at the fields and town. "Had that meteor not struck, Shu Jing would have set a burn in only a few weeks. Every year, this land burns; every summer, smaller fires stave off the larger. That is the duty of Shu Jing's lord, and he sees to it well."

"Wouldn't it be better if it didn't burn at all?" Aang said skeptically. "I mean, traditions are good, but..." Temul's eyes narrowed, and he gulped. "Okay, sure, you're right."

"Do you think the grass is dead?" The ghost sounded honestly curious.

"Um... smoke? Ashes? All black?" Aang pointed out.

Toph dug her toes in, the open edges of her shoes shushing on ash. "Feels like some pretty long roots down there."

"So there are," Temul agreed. "Soon there will be rain. New growth will sprout like emerald flames, for all that lives here to feed upon. And because the wiregrass has burned, it will flower, and set seed." She gave Aang a stern look. "Without fire, the wiregrass dies."

Aang looked like he really wanted to sit down, if he could just find a spot without ashes. "But... trees," he insisted. "The Hei Bai forest - the Fire Nation burned it down! It was awful!"

"What kind of forest?" Temul rested her hands on her hips, as if she had all eternity to wait for the answer.

"What *kind*?" Aang echoed. "How could anybody tell? They were all black and smoking!"

"Not a woodworker, are you?" Temul gave him a dark look. "I thought all children of the Water Tribes touched wood to see if there might be a shipwright in them."

"Oaks," Katara said quickly. "They were oaks, mostly. Remember the acorns?"

Sokka rubbed his head, and scowled. "How could I forget?"

"Hardwood forest." Temul looked grim. "Steel and fang, what do they teach young idiot firebenders these days... that was a foul deed. Hardwoods rarely burn. And like your taiga, when

they do, it's crown fires. I lived over two centuries, and I can count on one hand the number of those forests I've seen burn."

Two centuries? Sokka's jaw dropped. *No way!*

"You're Temul of Shu Jing!" Toph's shoulders tensed; Sokka felt the ground twitch under them. "You knew Avatar Kyoshi!"

"That I did." Air itself seemed to catch fire over her shoulders, burning blue and lethal as Azula's flames. "Why do you seek news of a murdering Avatar?"

"She wasn't a murderer!" Aang protested. "I mean, Chin the Conqueror died, but if he hadn't been so dumb, he wouldn't have just *stood* there-"

"I did not see Chin the Conqueror fall." Temul's voice was ice. "See the storm tear the ocean over your village, waterbender. Feel the waves carry you out to sea! Fight to swim, to *live*, for day upon hopeless day. And when all is lost, when the ocean seeks to swallow you whole - then, hope there is a net to save you, as I was saved, flung by the dragons who loved us!" Azure fires flared and crackled, burning in a black darker than night. "Then, you may speak to me of *murder*." Folding her arms, she began to fade.

"Wait," Sokka called out hastily. "Please."

Faint as mist, she growled at him. "You try my patience, cub."

"You're a firebender," Sokka quipped, dragging out pages of symbols copied from sand. "You guys are never patient." *Got it.* "You're a noble, right? You read High Court?" He gulped at her look. "Please? We need help. If Sozin killed you - we're trying to fix things."

Something seemed to move in the darkness behind her, like a storm of wings. "You never asked *why* Sozin slew me."

...Eep.

"The Painted Lady gave us this message." Aang stepped up beside him. "Do you believe her?"

"Her mark on two of you grants you safer passage than you know." Temul's gaze rested on Aang. "She may believe in you. But Jang Hui has been without hope a long time. Shu Jing is stronger than that." Delicate as fog, she touched the paper. "I have no wish to trespass on favors she has granted."

"You're not going to help?" Aang flung down his hands, obviously *not* bending. "We're trying to do what's right!"

"A proper citizen of the Fire Nation, even the most boorish lout raised in the colonies," Temul stated dryly, "would know that spirit-matters should be taken to his loyal lord for advice and aid. For lords have strength to face the spirits that even a skilled firebender may not."

"Earth and water," Toph pointed out. "We don't have lords."

"So you do not. But *you*, girl." Temul leveled a stare at Katara, glittering gold. "You carry a vendetta, do you not?"

"I- that doesn't-" Looking at Aang, Katara shook her head. "I won't use that. Zuko meant it to *hurt* us."

"When the infection is deadly, Agni's knife must cut deep." Temul's gaze never wavered. "Did you think you carried only ink and paper? The prince's blood marks what is yours by right. Every spirit in this land knows whose gift you bear." She lifted a pale brow. "And every lord knows it is his duty to assist one on vendetta in her search. Piandao of Shu Jing is a true lord, honorable and just." She stepped back. "Seek him, or not, as you will."

Sokka blinked. The night was empty.

"Can we trust her?"

Sokka did a double-take. Aang, not sure about somebody? "I thought you could hear when somebody lied."

"When they're talking, yeah. It's in the air." Aang looked a little white around the eyes. "But - you know how Toph said she didn't have a heartbeat?"

The earthbender shivered. "Freaky."

"Yeah." Aang gulped. "She wasn't *breathing*, either."

Sokka traded a glance with his sister. *Camp and get warm*, Katara mouthed at him.

Good idea. The hairs on the back of his neck had been standing so long, their feet were starting to hurt.

But Aang needed an answer. They all did, or nobody was going to get any sleep tonight.

Trust a ghost? Don't trust one? Dad, I wish you were here, I don't know-

Oh. So *obvious*.

"I think," Sokka said, "we need to find out why Temul died."

Chapter End Notes

Yes, "fire ice" really does exist. Check out methane clathrate on Wikipedia. Canon put natural gas deposits right on the edge of a continent at the Northern Air Temple? Then fire ice would be there, in Real Life!

I have my reasons for the Sanskrit. (Wow, people figured that out fast!) One of them being, well... look up Agni in Wikipedia. Very interesting entry - especially as lightning is recognized as one of his offspring. Please don't take anything non-English in this story as linguistically accurate. I do my best, but I'm no language expert, only an amateur who loves playing with words.

About Aang denying responsibility for Kyoshi's actions - true, in canon, in "Avatar Day" he went all-out to clear Kyoshi's name. (And found out she was guilty - by Chin Village's definition of guilt - anyway. Heh.) However, in this fic, Sokka and several other people (Iroh, Yangchen, others) have since pointed out that Aang is not the same person as Kyoshi. Or Roku. Or Kuruk. And so on. The Avatar Spirit reincarnates, yes. But the human who is the Avatar is different, every time.

The Painted Lady, and Agni, don't hold Aang responsible for Kyoshi's actions. They do hold the Avatar Spirit responsible, as Kyoshi had to use that to set up the Fire Lord in the first place. Each Avatar is responsible for what they choose to do with the power they command. Agni's beef with the Avatar Spirit goes back many, many thousands of years. Agni's beef with Aang is a straight line back to the North Pole and Koizilla.

Also take into account the fact that Agni's beef with the Avatar may have more than one source. In mythology, spirits associated with fire are often treated warily by humans and other Powers, with good cause. The other three elements are. But fire doesn't exist without consuming something else. So when the spirit of the world incarnates as a human, putting human values on what a spirit does (as Yangchen all but said was the purpose of the Avatar, in the whole spirit world quest Aang went on after he was hit by lightning), then that incarnation is dealing with three apparently "friendly" elements... and one that has to eat other things to exist.

In a situation like that, if there's a dispute, who looks like the guilty party?

By the way, spirit of fire versus spirit of the whole world? Just who do people think holds the upper hand in that one?

Chapter 51

"A hundred years ago, people wanted to talk to you," Aang grumbled, walking away from the weapons shop with Sokka trudging wistfully behind. They'd split up from the girls to cover more ground talking to people. He was beginning to think that might have been a mistake. A few snickers from Katara would have snapped Sokka out of playing with *every* weapon in the place. For *hours*.

The owner hadn't been any help either, even when it was obvious Sokka couldn't afford to buy that sword like Temul's. He'd just smiled and given Sokka tips on grip and swing, matter of fact as Gyatso talking out the best way to throw a cake at somebody.

Which was one of the things Aang didn't like remembering about Kuzon. Most of the time his friend had been fun, if a lot more quiet than anybody should have been. But wave sharp steel around? Kuzon's eyes would just light up. Like weapons were *fun*.

Sokka's eyes had lit up like that. Just for a minute. It made Aang feel kind of queasy.

"He wanted to talk," Sokka said, finally looking away from the shop. "Just not about Temul. Can't say I'm surprised."

"Because Fire Lord Sozin was their *great hero*." Aang rolled his eyes. Why couldn't these people ever tell the truth?

"That's part of it," Sokka thought out loud. "But mostly... well, she's a ghost."

"And most people can't fight spirits. Yeah, I get it." That was the Avatar's duty. Again. Did Sokka *have* to keep making him feel guilty about getting frozen for a hundred years? He hadn't meant to land in the ocean.

"No, Aang..." Sokka closed his eyes a second, and shook his head. "Didn't Gyatso ever tell you to keep an eye out for your family-" He cut himself off, glancing to make sure no one was in earshot. "Right. No family. Come on, we need to talk."

What does family have to do with ghosts? Curious, Aang followed him into the shadows inside an ostrich-horse stable, giving a skritch behind the beak to one blood bay that tried to nibble his headband.

"Okay," Sokka said, keeping his voice low. "I don't know how it works here, but Gran-Gran always said ghosts were different from spirits. Spirits - well, spirits are Avatar stuff. Ghosts used to be people. Only after they died, they stuck around, because... they can have a lot of reasons. The scary ones want someone dead. Lucky for everybody, there's not a lot of those around. The rest of them try to look out for their family. Maybe they show up in a dream, to tell you a name that'll keep a new baby safe. Maybe they just show up in front of you, so you jump back, and you don't step on the ice-snake. That kind of thing."

Spooky. "Nomad," Aang pointed out, cheered up. "If we don't have families, I bet our ghosts don't either. And we don't want people dead. So I guess we wouldn't have ghosts."

Sokka frowned. "Kind of not the point."

Right. Temul was a firebender. Had been a firebender. A *spooky* firebender. But if spooky was tied to family, maybe it made sense. "You mean, people won't talk because they think a ghost would be

trying to help them." Aang chewed on that. "I guess she was, if things were supposed to burn." They could still smell the smoke now. It had made Appa all twitchy this morning. *Hang in there, buddy. We'll be back soon.*

"Aang." Sokka looked dead serious. "We're not Temul's family."

"But we were there to help," Aang pointed out. "That's enough."

"Not according to Gran-Gran."

"Your dad says Gran-Gran doesn't know everything." Aang blew out a breath of relief. Now he knew what Sokka was worried about. "Come on, Sokka. If she wanted revenge on somebody, why would she show up to help us?"

"I don't know," Sokka admitted. "That's what bothers me."

Aang grinned at him. "You worry too much."

"Maybe," Sokka shrugged. "Dad would be worried, if he were here. He's not. So I've got to do it... oh. Hi."

Stable boards rattled and creaked, without feet walking on them. At least, no feet they could see. Ostrich-horses snorted, backing away from stall doors. Aang drew in a breath-

Boards creaked quickly, like something scurrying out.

Aang let air sigh out, not bending. "Why does Toph like that thing?"

"Why do pirates like reptile-birds?" Sokka stuck his head out the stable door. "Hey, guys. I thought we were meeting up outside town?"

"We need to head toward the other side of town." Katara stepped out of the sunlight. "I think we found something."

"You think this is the right place?" Aang whispered in the darkness. Sure, he was getting better at earthbending. But being shut in one of Toph's tunnels, away from the wind - it was kind of spooky. And Boots' tip-toe steps behind them didn't make it any less spooky.

He wasn't going to do anything to Boots, though. Not as long as it stayed just tip-toeing. Toph had been muttering about burying him up to his chin so he could practice bending with his face, Bumi-style. It was way, way better to let Boots distract her from plans like that.

"It's the only place around here that seems to have guards," Katara said seriously. "I don't know if it has anything to do with Temul, but it has to be important."

"*Spooked* guards," Sokka muttered. "You getting any... I dunno, Avatar stuff feelings?"

Yeah, right. Aang put a hand on the dirt to check where it was before he bent it. Tao had told him a lot about clearing his mind and letting the earth talk to him, and none of that had done any good-

Something tingled under his fingertips. Pain. Grief. Sad, like the gray rains before winter, and yet-
"Hot! Get back!"

"Seriously?" Moving confidently through utter darkness, Toph pressed her hand where his had been. "Feels like earth to me."

"It was hot," Aang objected. "*Burning* hot." But his hand didn't feel burned. Just achy.

"We must be in the right place." Katara's dress rustled. "The fishmonger told us, before she looked around and acted like it didn't matter. The burned ground. At sunset."

"Guards are all out of sight." Raising her hands over her head, Toph lifted.

Air! Aang scrambled out into the fading afternoon in pure relief. How could anybody *like* living underground-

Black. Black *everywhere*.

"No..." He had to bite down on the urge to yell it, so loud the Fire Lord himself would hear. *Everything* was black. Dead. All dead. How could anybody do this?

"The earth burned." Toph was pale, feeling with her toes like she'd stepped into a swamp full of leeches. "It's all burned." She swallowed. "It doesn't feel good."

"It hurts." Aang shuddered. "Maybe we should just go- Katara?"

She was on her knees in the ashes, water wrapped around her hands. "I want to help," Katara said softly, to no one he could see. "If anyone's got a problem with that, let me know."

"You're going to try to heal the ground?" Sokka said in disbelief.

"We helped heal a river. Why not?" Frowning in concentration, Katara moved her hands, a gentle inch at a time.

Something twinged. Not a bad twinge, Aang thought, as black seemed to soften, just a little. Just - weird.

Shaking his head, Sokka walked a few steps away, tracing the edge of dead black with his gaze. "Look at that. It's like somebody cut this whole clearing out with a burning knife. What happened here?"

"Not a knife." Toph moved a little closer to Sokka, still walking like she wished she couldn't touch the ground. "It's like - kind of a bowl pulled out sideways." She made a scooping motion with her hand. "Right by the edge, it's shallow. Over there-" She pointed toward the darkest spot of ground. "It's deep. Really deep."

Katara looked up. "Maybe I should-"

"No!" Aang wasn't sure why he said it. That spot just felt *wrong*. "Stay there. I think it's helping."

"Almost sunset, anyway," Sokka said thoughtfully. "Funny; the way people didn't want to talk about this, I was sure we'd see something..."

The world faded.

"...Eep?"

Grass waved around their feet, oddly chill. Silent ranks of red armor ringed them in the mist, bare faces just as grim as skull masks. Sokka grabbed for Boomerang, but there were just too many-

"Don't move!" Aang hissed.

Hand clamped on the wrapped grip, Sokka froze. "Aang?"

"They look like they're breathing. They're not." Aang tried not to gulp. "Just- get over here. I don't think they see you." He scanned the armored ranks, as Sokka tip-toed over. "I don't think they see us at all."

"They're standing right there!" Katara whispered.

Aang shook his head, trying to figure it out. "They don't feel like spirits. Not even like Temul. More like - *ghosts* of ghosts."

"Oh yeah," Sokka breathed. "Makes *perfect* sense."

"Temul of Shu Jing." Ornate red robes. A golden flame in a white topknot, gleaming in the sunset. An expression Aang *knew*, somehow, even though he knew he'd never seen the old man in his life. "I offer you one last chance to yield. Admit your wrong, and save your life."

"Fire Lord Sozin." The voice was familiar, yet off, as an ancient firebender stepped onto the gray grass that had been blackened earth. "I will not. You malevolent *creature*."

"Temul!" Katara stood up straight, water whipping into her hand, ready to lash out. "Aang, we've got to do something!"

"It's not her." Aang hadn't been sure until he said it, but he was sure now. "It's not, Katara. And that's not the Fire Lord. I think - this is what Tao called a *phantom*..."

"Stubborn old witch!" Steam blew from Sozin's breath. "My men tracked them here! They were carried west on *your* ship! You dare not deny it!"

"I do not deny it. I'll snarl it to the skies!" Temul flung in his face. "They're gone, you paranoid monster. Gone, and ever beyond your reach!" She snarled low in her throat, gold eyes blazing. "Make yourself a monster, and it's your own hell to burn in. *You will not make monsters of my clan!*"

"Tell me where they are." Flames flickered around elegant hands. "Or all your clan will die."

"Women and children," Temul snarled. "*Helpless* women and children, you'd hunt down and slaughter. Those nuns couldn't hurt a flutter-wasp, even to save their own children! *Especially* to save their children. Their *elders* saw to that."

What?

"Women and children." Sozin's smile was thin and cold, as armored ranks parted to reveal pale faces above dark chains. "All that's left of your clan, is it not?" Pale gold narrowed. "Submit."

The phantom's gaze swept those weeping and grimly silent. "Be brave," she breathed. Looked up-

Aang jammed himself back against Sokka's shoulder, grabbing blind for Katara's hand. That stare; that horrible, heart-thumping, breath-stealing stare...

"I will never yield to you." Temul lifted her hands in a graceful arc, open and patient as the sea. "Save your threats, and *fight*."

Fire roared.

Aang couldn't breathe. Or he was breathing too fast; he wasn't sure. He could feel Sokka's arm

warm against his shoulder, Katara's fingers tight and sweaty on his, Toph behind them all with her toes dug into the ground. He'd seen firebenders attack, Zuko and Zhao and Azula-

Even Jeong Jeong hadn't thrown fire like this.

Sozin stabbed like a spear of sun, striking with punches and kicks of blazing fire. Temul melted back and sideways, twisting his flames aside, curling them back on the Fire Lord like ruby whips-

"Suki," Sokka breathed. "She fights like *Suki*."

Like Katara, Aang thought, not wanting to say it. Never wanting to say it. Fire should blast and burn. It shouldn't flow like water, cling and sear like lava...

Watching this, he could finally believe the stories he'd heard of Master Pakku's battle against the firebenders. Sinking tanks into ice with a push of his hand. Riding a waterspout to ravage Fire Nation soldiers. Because maybe Sozin was old, and Temul was *ancient*, but the flames hissed and crackled for them stronger than any bender he'd ever seen-

A sweeping kick, and Temul was down; Sozin crouched beside her, dagger of flame above her heart. "I will find them," he stated, cool as if he asked her to tea. "And the Avatar."

"Young fool." Blistered red, Temul's lip curled. "Finish what you've started."

"Oh, I intend to." Sozin's smile could have cut steel. "For those who defy me... Shu Jing will be an excellent example." He raised his voice, without looking over his shoulder. "Start with the youngest."

"No-!"

Fire cut short her cry; left her gasping in the ashes, black seared through flesh and lung and bone.

"Firebending comes from the breath." Sozin had Azula's smile. "No breath... no fire."

Turning on his heel, he stalked toward chained children.

Breathless, Temul's lips still moved.

You will not, Aang felt in his lungs, in his bones; a spark all the way down to his spirit. *I am Temul of Shu Jing. I am the blood of dragons.*

Charred and blistered, one hand moved to white hair. Flipped out gleaming steel.

Fire is life.

Steel sank deep into her own flesh, crimson welling over ashes.

Agni, spare my children-

Yanking everything from Katara's waterskin, Aang swept ice over them.

The world burned.

...Ow.

Sokka blinked. Winced, and squeezed his eyes shut against the stabbing light of dawn. Aang's

school uniform was bunched under his right hand. Katara's bony shoulders were under him and Aang. Toph was a small, light weight against his left arm. And everyone was breathing. Thank goodness-

Wait. There was something on top of them. Felt kind of like... a blanket?

Hand-like paws thumped down weight on the back of his head. Patting him, Momo chirped.

"No, Momo," Sokka muttered. "Go back to Appa. He's gotta be worried."

"He's not the only one."

Older. A guy, definitely. Worried, but with the kind of laugh Dad had up against icebergs. Sokka blinked again, pain or no pain.

"Here. Water should help."

Dark hair and beard, with just a little gray. Gray eyes - and wasn't that weird to see on a Fire Nation guy? Robe and trousers, all red and black and gold-

And a sword. Like Temul's sword. Only at his side, not over his shoulder.

Sokka gulped water, and swallowed. Touched the blanket over them, and tried to blink away the headache. "Um. Thanks?"

"I couldn't risk moving you at night." The swordsman gave him a hand up to unsteady feet. "The curse had already struck you down, but left you alive. I didn't want to give it an excuse to think twice."

"Curse?" Sokka squeaked.

"But it's dawn now. Nothing more should happen," the swordsman went on. "We should go before anyone else notices you. The Guard gets a bit touchy about intruders in the area." A flash of a smile. "They're supposed to prevent that. Cuts down on the horrible, agonizing deaths."

"Deaths?" Sokka gulped, looking down to check everybody was still breathing-

The ground's not burnt.

Oh, it was still pretty black, everywhere they'd been lying. But there was a difference between black and *dead*, and they'd apparently been smack in the middle of it. Though there was red on one of Aang's hands, and some of Katara's hair was singed at the edges... "The fire - it was a *phantom*, he said. It wasn't *real*."

"*Real* can be more flexible than most people know." The swordsman bent to gather up Aang. "Come on. Let's get away from any annoying reports."

Reports. As in, official notice that people with their descriptions were in the area. Yeah, that fit nicely into *bad idea* territory.

Grunting as he picked up Katara, Sokka followed. *Hang on, Toph. I'll be back.*

It wasn't just Zuko, Sokka decided a little later, as he helped load groaning kids into the back of a farmer's cart. Komodo-rhinos were just *born* cranky.

"Thanks, Jinsuke," the swordsman said, walking alongside as the gray-haired farmer clicked his

animal to a walk.

"No offense, Lord Piandao, but thank me by getting shut of that betobeto," Jinsuke grumbled.
"That's a horrible thing to wake up to, that is!"

Something stomped the ground, kicking up dust as Sokka gaped. *Lord Piandao?* "Boots found you?"

A happy rattle.

"Interesting allies you have." Piandao rifled through a familiar sheaf of papers. "But I suppose someone so young, on vendetta, needs all the friendly help she can find." He smiled. "I'd heard legends of friendly betobeto before, but this is the first one I've ever met."

Squeaks of leather, almost lost in the creak of wheels.

"Hmph," Jinsuke snorted. "Still like to turn a man's bones to water... Vendetta, is it? Where's your *parents*, boy?"

"Dad's in the war," Sokka said shortly. "And Mom..." His knuckles whitened; he let go of the side of the cart before wood could break. "Gran-Gran... the village needs her. There isn't anybody else." Spirits. So true. In more ways than one. "Um... can we have those back now?"

Piandao handed them over, looking over wincing children and one suspicious lemur. "Breakfast should help. And tea." He shook his head. "Very strong tea."

"For a curse?" Sokka muttered.

"For the headache." Piandao smirked a little. "We'll have to see about the curse."

Well, young prince. You've given me an interesting problem.

Piandao sipped his tea as the Avatar's little band of innocents dug into breakfast. Truly innocent, despite the deadly havoc they'd wreaked across the world. Only someone who'd never been tangled in politics and espionage would have kept both sets of vendetta papers together. Much less kept the prince's letter in with them.

A very *interesting* letter. Full of all sorts of thorny implications.

Toph Bei Fong has the prince's trust.

You didn't use even an honorable opponent's letter as a cover unless you trusted that they would understand the need for the deception. So the Avatar's earthbending teacher had the trust of the Southern Water Tribe and Prince Zuko. That had potential, if the girl was any kind of diplomat. Or even if she weren't. Put two enemies in a room with a third person neither wanted to insult, and they might at least talk to each other.

Prince Zuko is no longer loyal to the Fire Lord.

Something the White Lotus had been scheming toward for years, ever since Zuko had been banished. Over the past centuries the Fire Nation had tested Kyoshi's decree and their own souls to destruction. There were *very* few loopholes. Citizens of the Fire Nation were subject to the Fire Lord's will, and all the spirits' vengeance for defying it. But a banished prince was not a citizen. He was only what he was; a firebender born of royal blood, subject to execution if he ever entered Fire

Nation waters again. Kyoshi's decree could no more hold him than it could an arctic eel.

Prince Zuko does not trust the Avatar.

Much more problematic, and a situation the White Lotus had never counted on. Of course Kyoshi's actions had left the Fire Nation suspicious of Avatars. But Roku had not been disliked, outside of Sozin's court, and the White Lotus had been certain that any royal heir without such a *personal* grudge could be brought around to friendship. Especially once they'd found out who the Avatar was. Aang was apparently friendly, honest, open...

Unfortunately, from Zuko's letter, he was all that - and a walking disaster area.

I wish I could chalk that up to learned pessimism, Piandao thought, staring into his tea. *If anyone's earned the right to be cynical, that young man has*. But given the reports he had of Princess Azula, and of the Avatar...

Agni. What a mess.

No help for it. White Lotus plans to encourage the Avatar and the prince to form an alliance would have to be amended. Hopefully, General Iroh was working on that.

Putting Prince Zuko and Katara in close contact at any time, under any circumstances, is likely to end... badly.

Frost and fire, but that was the *snarliest* polite letter Piandao had had the misfortune to read since the last time he'd intercepted a copy of Shidan's letter to War Minister Qin. Which, when you read between the lines, had told the War Minister that if he thought Byakko was holding back resources from the war, he was free to come look for them. Of course, the seas around Byakko were very rough, and there were creatures in the open ocean even a warship would want to avoid...

No fool, Qin had never accepted that invitation.

That the prince had resorted to that intensity of written venom - the girl was an enemy. Then, now, and probably forever. Which made Zuko's gift of a lawful vendetta... very disconcerting.

Admit it, old soldier, Piandao told himself, watching the quiet scuffle between Sokka and Toph over tea sweets. *You should have known better than to believe any reports on Ozai's son at face value.*

And there was the sticking point. He'd dealt with Pakku enough times to have a fair idea how strongly the Water Tribes felt about revenge. And he'd studied enough White Lotus records to sift some of the bias out of Temul's occasional ghostly rants; the Air Nomads had valued a peaceful solution to every problem, even if such solutions might strike other nations as completely unjust. He knew what Zuko's gift would have done.

Stab the Avatar's bond with his friends, through the heart.

He knew it. And *so had Zuko*.

The skill that had crafted that letter wasn't as much of a surprise as it should have been. Temul had been there when he'd pulled a half-drowned six-year-old princeling from the river, muttering ghostly imprecations about what good was it to be an old soul if you couldn't remember how not to die?

He'd asked her about that, many times. She would only smirk, and had told him then not to bother

teaching the prince the sword. Anyone out of Shidan's line would never be satisfied with only one blade.

So the fact that Zuko could launch such a deadly attack didn't surprise him. Sixteen or not. No matter what Azulon's and Ozai's opinions on the young prince, Zuko was as much a child of Sozin as Lu Ten had been. No one in that family was stupid.

That Zuko *had* attacked the bond between the Avatar and his teachers - that was worrisome.

We need to restore balance to the world. We need the Avatar, and his teachers, alive and sane.

The prince claimed he'd broken loyalty to Ozai, yet he'd struck in a way that could only further the Fire Lord's interests. Why?

Worry about that later. For now - I need to fix the damage. Somehow.

"So..." Sokka let go of some of the sweets to pry Toph loose. "You said something about a curse?"

Aang gulped.

"Most of Shu Jing knows enough to avoid it." Piandao deliberately did not smile. Avatar or not, what they'd done was dangerous. They needed to know that, before they stumbled into something worse. Some place there wouldn't be a friendly ghost to warn them off.

Unless she didn't warn them.

Possible. Very possible. He hated to think that about an ally; and Temul *was* his ally, as she had been Kuzon's. But Kuzon had never been one of the White Lotus. Rage and revenge bound Temul to this world, and one of the spirits she'd vowed vengeance on now blinked at him from gray eyes.

He didn't think Temul would have *enticed* them into the curse. But not warn them? All too possible.

"We're from the colonies," Katara tried to look shy. "We didn't know."

"So your vendetta says. Gaipan. We have relatives there." Not that he officially knew where the remnants of Temul's clan had fled. But practically, yes. Some had been there. Whether they were still there now, after reports placed the prince's motley fleet at the scene... who knew? "Generally speaking, if there are armed guards around an area, it's a good idea to stay out. People have burned to death there before."

"But it was a phantom," Aang objected.

"It was," Piandao acknowledged. "It was also Temul's last stand. Where she called down Agni's wrath, like a dragon-child of legend. When the wind and sky are right, when memory stirs in burned earth... that fury rages yet again." He gentled his voice. "I've seen it myself; luckily, only from the edges. I was able to dive clear without more than a burned robe. If you were inside... I can guess you have questions." *There's innocence, and then there's stupidity. Which is your burden?* "It wasn't like what they taught you about Fire Lord Sozin in school."

"No." Aang swallowed. "He *burned* through her *chest*! He left her on the ground, he was going to torture people in front of her while she *died*-!"

"He was provoked," Piandao said dryly. "Some legends call Sozin a dragon-child as well. They tend to get vicious under stress." He gave Aang a measuring look. "If you saw that much, then you

know how she defied him."

"She saved people." Katara sat up straight, defiant. "And he killed her for it!"

"As was his right in an Agni Kai," Piandao stated. *If you don't know that much, it's a wonder you haven't been caught.* "As she would have had the right to kill him, if she'd won. Even against the rightful Fire Lord." He shrugged. "Torturing her clan after she'd fallen... no, not even the Fire Lord has that right. I suspect that's why Agni answered her plea. Even when those she'd risked her life and clan to defend were none of our people."

The waterbender fumed. "It shouldn't matter *what* people she saved-

Sokka jabbed Katara with an elbow. "Why'd she do it?" the Water Tribe boy wondered. "Why save airbenders? They attacked the Fire Nation. Right?"

You pass as one of us much better than your friends do, Piandao thought. *Interesting.* "That's what your teachers told you. But if your vendetta led you here, you need to know the truth. There was no attack. And no Air Nomad army." He didn't let his gaze linger on Aang. "There hasn't been an Air Nomad army for a very long time."

The Avatar bit his lip. "The Fire Lord lied."

"He did," Piandao agreed. "No one expected it. He was rumored to be a dragon-child, and dragons never lie." He sighed. "Almost never. Dark dragons can, they say. But no one realized Sozin was one. Until it was too late."

Toph puffed away her bangs. "Temul knew."

"Not soon enough to save herself," Piandao corrected her. "Though I wonder if she would have tried. She was old; so much older than any of us. I doubt she would have wanted to live in the world Sozin made." He smiled ruefully. "She almost got him. And he had to spend so much time pacifying Shu Jing, the airbenders were long gone. Even her clan managed to get away. No one still alive was about to swear loyalty. Not after what he did to Temul."

Sokka squinted at him in consideration. "But you're here."

"I'm adopted." Piandao had to chuckle, remembering that hair-raising night after he'd forcefully impressed on the military that he was retired, and staying that way. "A word of warning, young man. Never let yourself become help in a domain where a ghost wants someone to take care of her people."

He still remembered that midnight, waking to Temul's considering gaze.

"My kin are scattered. My domain is unguarded. Byakko sends aid - but they are not Kuzon.

"You need a home. And Shu Jing needs a great name."

He'd been a lone wanderer. A threadbare swordsman, perfecting his art no matter what nation he had to learn from. An orphan, abandoned by firebenders ashamed to know one of their offspring was powerless.

At dawn, all that had changed.

"You were adopted by a ghost?" Toph looked a little rattled. "I've heard of people setting up *marriages* between ghosts..."

"You have?" Katara looked aghast.

"Contracts," the little earthbender shrugged. "Sometimes it gets families to stop fighting."

"In the Earth Kingdom." Temul's chill touched the room, as she misted into the world behind the children. "Remember where you are."

She's here. In broad daylight. "Where's the danger?" Piandao demanded.

"Sitting in front of you, lord of Shu Jing." Blue flickered around her; not quite flames, not yet.

"Your compassion saved your lives, little healer. But you won't always be there to save him."

Soundless steps circled the little band, and Temul leveled a look at Aang that made Piandao's heart freeze. "You have a very great deal to answer for. *Kuzon*."

Oh. The swordsman winced, as the Avatar gave a nervous laugh. *This is going to end badly.*

"Heh heh... how'd you know my name?" Aang said brightly. "When we met the other night, well..."

"We were careful," Katara said firmly. "We didn't know you."

"You still don't." Temul was smoke and mist and chill, focused on her prey. "That name is not yours to use."

"He's dead, Temul," Piandao said forcefully. "I doubt he'd mind."

For a moment, her glance could have frozen lava.

He's not? We saw him die!

"I mind." Temul fixed her attention back on the youngsters. "Byakko was never a near ally, but they were constant, and their dragons were often kin of ours. So when a young boy not even third in line as heir came to me with a wild tale of what the Fire Lord meant to do..." A dark smile.

"Perhaps I should *show* you."

Temul stepped around one of the many gaping holes in the Western Air Temple's floor, glaring at the green below with the same fury she wished to turn on Sozin. "Eldest Sister. If you'll only *listen* to me-

The ancient nun held up a long hand, waving her words away. "Temul of Shu Jing. Manslayer. We know of you, and your actions toward airbenders."

Most of which boiled down to, *get your idiot wind-raising, crop-munching, marauding children and their bison the blazes out of my domain before I light you on fire.* A few times she *had* killed, true enough. But what did protecting her domain have to do with warning of an oncoming catastrophe?

Ah, yes. *The life of one man outweighs the world,* the nuns would say. Damn windy nonsense.

"Since we assume you would not have visited us if your intentions were evil..." The nun glanced meaningfully toward one of many sheer drops, a puff of wind rising with a twitch of her fingers. "We will repay your good intent by not recounting such slanderous words to your rightful monarch."

Might as well shout into a hurricane. "The Fire Lord. Is coming. To kill you," Temul enunciated.

"My own people believe you let the storms come without warning, so we might die. They're angry. They're not thinking straight. At least consider what you'll do if someone attacks! This place isn't defensible-"

"We do not all need violence to be at peace." The white-haired nun, who couldn't have been half her age, glanced at the sword over her shoulder with a lip curled in distaste. "No one can harm us here."

"Because everyone's always ridden a sky bison to reach this place?" Temul snorted. "I can think of at least three ways to-"

"Enough."

Snarling under her breath, Temul held onto her temper with both hands. She was a great name, ruler of more fire than this nun would have seen in a lifetime. No one insulted her like this! If the boy and Shidan hadn't been so utterly convinced of their warning...

"There is no will to harm here, save what you bring with you," the nun said icily. "You may take your leave. At any time."

Which had better be soon, hung unspoken between them.

Well, old ally. I tried. Temul inclined her head, a shred of courtesy. "Good luck. You're going to need it."

An old woman could stomp dramatically away. It just took practice. And careful glances, for those damn holes in the floor.

Can't get a ride down to the harbor. Not yet. I'd maim somebody.

She roamed the quieter corners of the temple complex like a red shadow, avoiding stray nuns with practiced ease. What she needed was a quiet spot. To slice steel through air, not flesh willingly deaf and blind.

Idiots, idiots, idiots-

Steel, whispering through air.

Softening her steps, she followed the beckoning call. *Interesting.*

This was one of the forgotten sections of the Temple. Dust lingered on flagstones before blending into what might have been a wild garden, and vines growing from balcony to ceiling screened the clearing from any casual flyers.

On the edge of stone and earth, a swordsman danced.

Her blood seemed to freeze. So light. So impossibly fast, as if the small man raced the wind with each strike...

Onmitsu!

And yet - no red in dusty brown robes. No flashing fingers that would disable, stun, or kill. No bodies. Though there was a young nun, hand covering her mouth, gray eyes wide with fear...

Not of him. Of me.

A whirl of the nun's arms; the gust nearly blew Temul off her feet. The young woman moved in like a phoenix-eagle with one chick, wind whipping black hair. "Shih, *run!*"

"Peace!" Temul got out against the gale. "Peace, young one! I bring no fight here!"

"He's *not* going back!" The nun whipped her airstaff up to a credible guard, eyes glinting like she could already see herself beating Temul over the head. "You tell the Fire Lord-"

"I'm not here for the Fire Lord," Temul cut across her words. "If he knew what word I brought, the assassins would be on me already." She braced herself against the dying wind. "But you'd know about that, wouldn't you, Shih? Or should I say... Demon of Taku?"

Gold eyes were half-hidden by black bangs. "You are not giving Gyate reason not to fear you, lady of Shu Jing. That you are not." A faint smile shadowed his face. "It is all right, Gyate. If Temul meant us harm, there would be a host of onmitsu with her. And a net."

"Fat lot of good that'd do." Temul brushed off dust, studying him just as he was studying her. The invasion of Taku had been over thirty years ago; the man before her had to be in his fifties, at the least. Yet he moved fluid as a teenager, and there wasn't a strand of gray in jet black.

A chi-user. And the onmitsu let him go?

Well. She doubted they'd *let* him do anything. The Demon's swords resting in front of Sozin's throne had been salt in the smarting wound of Roku's casual rout of the Fire Army. If there was any one man Fire Lord Sozin had hated in the world as much as Roku...

Temul blinked, Gyate's fear and fury suddenly making sense. "The Eldest Sister doesn't know you're here, does she?"

Gyate blanched.

Temul hid a grin, as Shih interposed himself between the young lady and her gaze. *Oho. So it's that way, is it?* Amazing. Certainly she'd had to deal with the consequences of wandering Air Nomad boys before; usually just youngsters with broken hearts, but sometimes - well, more serious. But Air Nomad girls? Never. "I won't say anything. You have my word."

Twin breaths of relief. Temul watched them sigh together, and felt a twinge of regret for her late husbands. She'd stopped marrying after the third; it was too heartbreaking when they couldn't master bending enough to last. "But you have to know how dangerous this is," she said, trying to be gentle. "If your children aren't benders..."

"He *was*." Gyate's face crumpled, gray wet with tears. "And now she is, and - it's only a few more months until she's old enough, and..."

Shih drew her closer, face grim with sorrow. "I am here. I swear I will be here."

A nun, grieving her children? Unheard of. As out of place as an ex-assassin in a Temple-

Oh, Agni. This is my chance. "Here is exactly where you'd better not be," Temul said swiftly. "My ship is in the harbor. Take the children out to see it. *All* of them. And any of the young nuns you can talk into keeping you company. *Go.*"

"Take the children?" Gyate drew back, gripping her airstaff with white-knuckled fingers. "Go against the Elders?"

"Who will, no doubt, be in pursuit. By air," Shih said practically. "Even with a week's lead, they would find us."

"The Elders don't have a week." Temul would not reach for her blade. But oh, she wanted to. "The rumors are true. The Eldest Sister won't believe it. Frost shatter it, I don't want to believe it. But the comet is coming. Sozin means to use it." She scorched Gyate with a glance. "Everyone still here will burn."

"No." Gyate paled. "You're telling the truth. How can you be...?"

White brows rose, as Temul looked her over yet again. Not quite as young as she looked. Yet that shaven forehead still had no tattoos. "You're not a master." *So how do you know I speak the truth?*

"I just - I *know*." Her fingers wove into Shih's. "Not with everyone. But people who train with swords..." She shifted her shoulders, uncomfortable. "You breathe a different way. I *know*."

"So you believe me." One crushing weight off her shoulders. Another, far more deadly, gripped Temul's heart. If she'd been able to convince the Elders, if even one had listened - all the Temple could have vanished in mist of their own making, with no trail for Sozin to follow. Now? *Agni, help us.*

"Prepare for a long ride," Shih told Gyate. "Convince those you can. I have... some words to exchange with the lady."

Glancing worriedly between them, Gyate nodded. Leapt over and off the balcony railing, and soared away.

"If you're thinking of pulling some damn fool suicidal last stand," Temul growled, "*don't*."

From his start, she knew Shih'd been planning *exactly* that. "Those who do not leave will be helpless-"

"They're airbenders. They're not helpless." Temul paused, then drove home the knife. "And they don't love you."

Shih was pale around the lips, hand near his own hilt. "Those of Air are not allowed attachments to this world."

"Since when did being allowed stop anyone?" Temul said dryly. "She's pregnant again, you know."

Shih went white as milk.

Ha. Got him. Honestly, how could men be so blind to the signs? "Gyate needs you, Shih. Your daughter needs you. And the little one coming needs you. Keep that sword of yours sheathed. They need the assassin's stealth. Not his death."

The black phoenix tail whipped in negation. "I swore I would never be the demon again!"

"Not even to save them?" Temul kept her tone calm, no push of Fire behind it. A man had a right to his vows. "They'll need you, young man. Especially after I'm gone."

"After-" Shih cut himself off, gold eyes cold with calculation.

The Demon of Taku. Centuries of control, and Temul still felt the urge to shiver.

"Sozin will kill you."

Temul shrugged. "I know he'll try."

"He will. One way or another. He cannot afford to let such defiance stand. If you claim it is not disloyal to stand against this war, if your life shows that to be the truth..." Shih winced. "You will never keep this act secret. He will know you were here. And he will kill you."

All too likely. But she wasn't dead yet. "Which is why all of you will be leaving my ship before we reach Shu Jing," Temul said levelly. "With luck, friends will take you elsewhere. I don't know where. I *refuse* to know."

Shih inclined his head, acknowledging that grim wisdom. "Why?"

Spirits. Hadn't she asked herself that a thousand times, since a desperate boy and his dragon had landed on her ship?

"Because I'm all there is," Temul said at last. "I hate airbenders; I always have. But if I turn my back now, children will die." She lifted burning eyes. "Not while I still breathe."

My people will not be murderers. Not while I live...

Piandao's mansion faded back in, and Sokka gulped for air. *It was a phantom. It wasn't real.*

Though given what had happened last night, he hadn't tried to go anywhere near that flashing sword of Shih's. If it was half as sharp as the Kyoshi Island blade it looked like, he'd be lying on the floor bleeding to death while he was still trying to figure out what just happened.

Sokka shook his head, bumping fists with Toph to reassure him they were both still real. *What did just happen? If Temul showed us the truth, then - people tried to warn the Air Temples? That can't be right.*

"The problem with airbenders," Temul growled, padding around the protective stance of Katara and Aang, "is they don't *listen*."

"That's not true!" Katara protested. "He-" She bit her words off, alarmed.

"Oh, grow up," the ghost snorted; a weirdly solid sound, from mist and flickers of blue flame. "I've known what all of you are since the moment you set foot on this island. *Avatar*."

"That's right. I'm the Avatar." Aang took a step forward, gray eyes determined. "So *you're* not going to hurt *anyone*."

Piandao, Sokka noticed, had just quietly moved out of the line of fire. Oh, so not good.

Temul *laughed*.

So not a nice laugh, Sokka gulped, ice dancing down his spine. More a *hungry* laugh. As in, *spirits, I can't believe he was this dumb. And now I get to squash him.*

"You? Try to command me? You've had poor teachers, Avatar." Temul bent her head, just a little, misty gold boring into gray. "I am a Fire Nation ghost, little boy. A *dragon-child*. And you are no Fire Sage." Her smirk glinted with teeth. "Spit on a bonfire. You'd have better luck."

Sokka started. *I know that smirk.*

He'd seen it before. Lots of times. Just not on an ancient grandmother-ghost. That twitch of fingers, about to blaze sparks from white knuckles. The way lips pulled back, as if their owner was about to sink fangs into your throat. The sense of *coiling*, like an ice-viper about to strike. Those glinting, pale gold eyes...

"Stop scaring the boy, Temul," Piandao said firmly. "You're not going to hurt him."

"No." Temul's eyes were half-lidded; a viper gauging the distance to threat or prey. "No, not yet." She straightened, the sense of menace easing. "Listen to me, airbender. Do what all your Elders could not. *Hear me.*"

"No! You listen to me!" Aang stepped almost into that ghost-blue flame, glaring back. "We didn't do anything to you! And I'm not Kyoshi! Stop blaming me for Sozin's war!"

"*Sozin's war*, is it?" The smirk flickered back. "Tell me, boy. Where is your bison now?"

Aang went red. "Don't you *dare* hurt Appa!"

Wind picking up. Sokka shielded his face with his hands, backing against Toph in case they needed a quick way out. *Great. Now what can I do?*

"Hurt him? Agni, boy, what do you think I am?" Disgust dripped from Temul's voice. "Just like all the other Temple brats. You *never listen.*"

"Strangers have a hard time listening to what we don't say." Piandao's voice was scarily level, for a guy about a yard from a growing whirlwind. "Aang, calm down. Appa is fine. I have someone I trust on watch to make sure he doesn't stray too close to the village. Temul might frighten him; she has a history with your people. But she'd never hurt him."

"*You* knew who we were." Katara glared at the swordsman as the wind died down. "You lied to us!"

"You're wearing a flame in your hair," Piandao said dryly. "Who lied first?"

"That's different!"

"It always is, for the Water Tribes," the swordsman observed. "You don't believe any fight against outsiders is fair. Not unless you win." He leaned back. "To a certain extent, I respect that. A swordsman who passes up an advantage on the battlefield is foolish, and usually dead. When you fight to survive, there is no *fair*." He gestured around the room. "Try to see what I see. I am the lord of Shu Jing. The man responsible for protecting these people. And Prince Zuko's letter is rather explicit on the catastrophes that can happen when the Avatar decides to make himself obvious." A red-and-black shrug. "What would you do? Tell the whole truth? Or take the chance that by allowing yourself to seem deceived, trouble will pass your people by?"

Ouch, Sokka thought. And ouch again, for a different reason. "You kept the letter *with* the vendetta?"

"I wasn't going to use it!" Katara barely glanced away from Piandao. "How can you believe anything Zuko says? He's an *exile*."

"Exile, yes. Traitor? I think not." Piandao didn't glare back; just met her gaze, patient as the sea. "I know exactly why Prince Zuko was exiled. Do you?"

"Sparky's not the problem here." Toph stomped a foot on the floor, cocking her head to faint

echoes. "I want to know what you meant about Appa."

Her finger wasn't quite pointing Temul's way, but the ghost didn't seem to mind. "Your beast is currently munching his way through one of Jinsuke's more hidden fields," Temul said dryly. "It'll take years to heal that damage."

Piandao sighed. "He'll have recompense from me-"

"Say that again after you go down and dig the results," Temul growled. "Fertile char-loam smashed down to bricks. Tons, that creature weighs! Mark my words; it will be a decade before that pasture is fit for any more than cutting straw!"

Piandao winced.

"You're worried about Appa walking on the ground?" Aang said in disbelief.

"Yeah," Sokka said, before Aang could add anything about that being ridiculous. "I think they are. Toph, you said the rocks here were different. What about the dirt?"

Cracking her knuckles, Toph led the way outside, stepping off stone into the biggest garden Sokka had seen outside Ba Sing Se. Worked her toes into the grass. "Huh." Beckoned over her shoulder. "Boots off, Twinkletoes. I think you need to feel this."

Doubtful, Aang stepped onto green, eyes closed. "It's earth."

"Yeah. But not like back home." Toph shuffled her feet, rippling grass like a tiny badger-mole lurked beneath. "There's salt in it, even all the way up here. And it's *light*. Like feathers next to wood." She bent to put a hand on the ground, squeezing and expanding. "Whoof. Doesn't bounce back much, does it?"

"Not easily," Piandao agreed. "I'm no farmer. But I know enough to know why we have roads, and ship as much as we can by water." He eyed Aang. "Before there was a Fire Lord, riding komodo-rhinos across another domain's fields was grounds to start a clan war."

"And your damn bison outweighs a *dozen* komodo-rhinos, and you landed on our grazing every *year*!" Temul was mist and fire and snapping eyes. "And every year, the same excuses. 'Oh, they didn't know! Oh, they're only children. Grass grows back; what do *firebenders* know about *earth*?' You *never listened*!" Blue blazed around her. "That, and all the damn lies!"

"We don't lie!" Aang shot back.

"You don't lie *to each other*!" Temul snarled. "You knew damn well you could lie to *us*! And all of your outcasts did!"

"Outcasts?" Aang's eyes were round as melons. "We didn't have outcasts!"

"So you don't know." Temul's voice seemed to slither in Sokka's ears, scales sliding along his throat. "A master airbender, the *Avatar*, and your own people didn't think enough of you to tell you the truth." She stepped into Piandao's shadow, gaining solidity out of the sun. "This truth I know, from over two centuries dealing with your kind. Every year your Elders decided who could still live among you... and who could *not*. The liars, the cheaters, the *killers* - oh, *they* were not true Air Nomads. Or so your Elders would say, before they'd herd away the bison and dump the outcast off the mountain. *On the rest of us*."

Oh, man. Sokka swallowed hard, heart somewhere around his ankles.

"Your people were too *noble* to kill," Temul went on. "Too *pure*. Execute a criminal? Oh no; you'd only ban them from ever speaking to you again. And make them *go away*. And when they hurt one of us? When they *murdered* one of us, and we had to kill them?" She clicked her tongue, gold eyes glittering. "Oh, what horrible, *violent* people firebenders are. How uncivilized. How *monstrous*." Lips curled in a snarl. "If Sozin had wanted your Elders alone, I would have been first behind him!"

"But - Sozin *was* a monster. And you saved people," Aang protested. "How can you say killing airbenders was wrong, and then you wanted to kill the Elders - I don't understand you!"

"The first intelligent thing you've said all day." Temul *hmped*, fading. "And you never will understand, if you cannot *listen*."

Aang stared at where she'd been. "...I thought listening was earthbending."

"The way you think of it, I suspect it is." Piandao glanced at his empty shadow. "That's a problem, for outsiders dealing with the great names. Most of our lords grow up speaking High Court. In that tongue, there are two words that mean *listen*. There's *znu*, which is the listen you're used to. And then there's *kansatsusuru*."

"I'm going to guess that one isn't," Sokka sighed. "So what's that mean to anybody who isn't clipping their nails with rocks?"

Piandao lifted a brow at that. "Hard to translate. Dragon-words generally are."

"Dragons don't talk," Aang said firmly.

And Toph twitched at that. Sokka narrowed his eyes, remembering what she'd told his dad on a beach weeks ago. Zuko had *told* her things; about his loyalties, about the Fire Nation. What else had he told her?

"Not to you," Piandao agreed. "To us? They had ways. Kansatsusuru... the best words, I think, would be *watch closely*. Stop talking, and look at what's going on. See and feel the movement around you. Where it is. Where it was. Where it's going." He smiled ruefully. "I can imagine generations of firebenders, pointing at the ground and yelling at nomads to *listen*. What a mess."

"Watch the fire," Sokka said, half to himself. "See what it does. Gah! No wonder we can't talk to you guys."

"There aren't many in the Fire Nation who would believe the Avatar came to talk." Piandao glanced over them all, face sober. "Not to them, and certainly not to Fire Lord Ozai."

"But I do," Aang insisted. "I don't want to fight *anybody*. There's got to be a better way. The war's got to stop. If the Fire Lord makes you fight, and I stop him..." He shook all over, like Appa shedding water. "Why did you let her say things like that? Why did she show us stuff that didn't happen?"

Piandao's look reminded Sokka of Pakku about to lecture on the minuscule chance of his current student beating a sea slug. "That was a phantom of the past, Aang. It did happen. You saw what she saw."

"Then she didn't know what she saw," Katara said firmly. "Gran-Gran told us about airbenders. If someone had warned them before the Fire Nation attacked, they would have - well, they would have done something!" She crossed her arms. "Besides. *Demon* of Taku? Why would an Air nun hide someone like that?" She shuddered. "General Iroh's just called a dragon, and he broke into Ba Sing Se! How do you even *get* a name like that?"

"By killing the Fire Lord's enemies," Piandao answered. "Suddenly, violently, and without a trace. That's what onmitsu do." The look he turned on Katara was oddly sad. "You might be surprised to know what names you have in the Army's formal reports. That blast at the Northern Air Temple was... impressively deadly."

Sokka winced. Katara paled.

"We had to," Aang said, shaken. "They were going to kill people in the Temple!"

"Yes, they were. You had every right." Piandao looked reflective. "Shih thought he was in the right, at Taku. It was what he'd been trained for from birth. Yet he was one of the first to realize what Sozin really was. So he vanished, rather than be ordered to kill again."

"I don't buy it." Katara's eyes narrowed. "If he was such a great assassin, why not just kill Sozin? He could have stopped the war right there." She nodded toward Toph. "If it was real, she would have told us."

"I don't *know*," the earthbender admitted. "I saw it. Like the Painted Lady. I couldn't feel it. I don't know who's telling the truth. All I know is, there's salt in the soil. All the way up here."

"So maybe she was telling the truth about Avatar Kyoshi. That doesn't mean she was about anything else." She shot a dark look at Piandao. "I don't know how the Fire Nation got to the temples, but it must have been something nobody saw coming. If Temul *did* warn them - she should have tried harder."

Piandao, Sokka noted, really looked like he had a headache. "Oh, she did warn them."

"You weren't there-"

"I didn't have to be," the swordsman cut Katara off. "Sozin's Agni Kai is recorded in our history - along with Temul's so-called *treachery*. But there's one thing that isn't recorded; that you didn't see last night, or here and now. Temul knew *exactly* who was going to be helping the survivors from your temples. And she took that to her grave to save them." He turned a cool look on Aang. "I've heard you knew him. His name... was Kuzon of Byakko."

Katara started to say something. Stopped. Swallowed.

"Phantoms chill your soul, even if you don't feel it," Piandao said plainly. "You should be safe to rest here."

Silent as shadow, he stepped back inside the mansion.

"I guess he's okay," Aang said brightly. "Kind of weird, but... Sokka? Where are you going?"

"To apologize." Sokka headed for the back door.

"Why?"

Sokka stopped. Sighed, and wondered why parts of his life just refused to make sense anymore. "Maybe you don't believe Temul. But Piandao *does*. And he helped us."

The swordsman wasn't hard to find. Sokka entered one of the better lit rooms to the subtle scent of ink, and the shush of a sleeve as Piandao painted.

Lump in his throat, he knelt.

"Is there something you need?"

"More like something I have to say." And even this was weird. You didn't kneel on ice. Not if you liked your knees. "People... people are complicated."

The brush moved on; slow, steady motion. "So they are."

"Aang likes things simple."

"I see."

"He's kind of under a lot of pressure," Sokka said wryly. "Save the world, stop a war, try not to get killed?"

"Everyone has to save their own world." A pause, as the brush dipped in ink. "Some of us succeed more than others."

There's just one world, Sokka almost said. *Aang's problems are kind of bigger than ours.*

But he didn't. If Temul was mad because Aang wasn't paying attention, well... He was no Avatar. But he could at least try to figure out a lady who'd died rather than let Sozin-

Oh.

"Temul didn't hate airbenders," Sokka said, working it out. "She was mad at them. She wanted them to leave her people alone. But she didn't hate them." *Like Zuko doesn't hate my sister. Temul looked just like he did; steamy breath, snapping sparks, the works.* "That's the world she wanted to save. Someplace where maybe you didn't like the guys on the next mountain over, but you weren't trying to kill them."

Another deliberate stroke of black across paper. "Did she succeed?"

Sokka thought about that. "No. But... she kind of didn't lose, either."

The brush stopped. "Go on."

Oh boy. Sokka's mouth was dry. He tried not to gulp too loudly. "She died. And she's stuck here as a ghost; Gran-Gran always said that was a bad thing. But she died doing what she *wanted*. And people remember her. As long as somebody remembers there's a right thing to do... then it's not hopeless. No matter what."

"Very true." Piandao rinsed his brush in water. "Kuzon might have given up a long time ago if it hadn't been for Temul. He was lord of Byakko at fifteen, his nation had erupted in war against the world, and most of his family was dead. All he had was his betrothed, his dragon, and a very prickly ghost." A slight glance toward him. "She'll talk about him on stormy nights. She's cursed him for letting the onmitsu get the drop on him so young, but I've never once heard her wish she hadn't listened to him."

"Listened to-" Sokka's jaw dropped. "He got her to warn the Western Temple?"

"He didn't have time to stop," Piandao nodded. "Not if he hoped to get to the Southern Temple before the comet. So he found the closest ally he could." Gray eyes weighed him. "So you believe she did warn them."

Sokka chewed on that. "When Aang took us to the temple, he said there was no way anybody

could get up there without a sky bison. But the firebenders did. If the nuns thought that too... um. Aang's kind of good at ignoring things he doesn't want to hear." He thought a little harder. "Yeah, I think I do. It fits, you know? Katara... well, she thinks Aang's great, so all the airbenders had to be. But Aang keeps saying they didn't have evil people, they just didn't, and that's - people aren't *like* that. Not real people." *Oh. Oh, man.* "And if that's what they did, throw out people who lied so you had to deal with them... Aang pulled something like that on Zuko. He went ballistic."

"The Avatar..." Piandao clapped a hand to his forehead. "That letter begins to make much more sense."

Sokka rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well, it'd probably be crystal clear if you ever met the jerkbender-"

"Oh, I have."

"...Um." Sokka tried for a grin. "Really?"

"He was a six-year-old brat who couldn't swim, but tried anyway," Piandao recalled. "I always thought Azula dared him into the river, but Ursa wouldn't hear it... I had to pound the breath back into him. If Temul hadn't told me where he was, we'd have been short one young prince."

"You taught him how to swim?" Sokka said, incredulous. "Do you have any idea what he did?"

"No." Piandao looked intrigued. "What?"

"He followed *turtle-seals* into the North Pole, and..." Er. Maybe he shouldn't mention the whole Spirit Oasis thing, for the fishes' sake. After all, not too many people knew there were special koi fish up there; Zuko and Iroh weren't talking, and Zhao was kind of gone...

Zhao.

Gone or not, he still hated the firebender. Admiral Zhao had gotten to the Oasis - and the Moon - before they could all get back from Zuko's little detour. If Zuko hadn't shown up, Aang would have *been* there-

If Zuko hadn't shown up... Iroh wouldn't have been there.

Yue wouldn't have known she could save the Moon. The Northern Water Tribe would have been destroyed. And without waterbending, how could Aang ever be the Avatar?

No. Think hard. It's worse than that.

If Zuko hadn't pulled his climb through ice stunt, Aang *would* have been there. Meditating. With his spirit *somewhere else*.

Katara said his eyes were glowing. He was in the Avatar State. And Zhao already knew he couldn't hang onto Aang. You knew Zhao; bigger temper than his sideburns. If he'd found Aang helpless, he would have...

Sokka buried his face in his hands. *It didn't happen. Aang's alive. You've got to make sure he stays that way.*

"Sokka?" Piandao had risen from his writing table, brows drawn down in concern.

Sokka shook his head. "I think... Zuko screwed up, and saved the world."

Piandao laughed.

Laughing's good. I can still save something here. "I don't know if I can say *I'm sorry* for my friends," Sokka said. "I'm not even sure it means the same thing to the Fire Nation. Zuko didn't seem to think it did, not when Aang..." *Think. If listen means watch carefully - damn.* "Of course he didn't," Sokka sighed. "Aang *says* he's sorry, then goes and *does* what he's going to do anyway."

"And would that be accepted in the Water Tribes?" Piandao asked.

It stung - but he didn't *sound* sarcastic. Sokka hoped. "Not for long. We're all stuck together in igloos for the worst part of the winter. There's nowhere to get away from people seeing you're not doing what you said-" He cut himself off. "Islands. Ships. You can't get away either."

"Not the way nomads could," the swordsman agreed.

"And all we do now is travel," Sokka groaned. "A month in Ba Sing Se drove him nuts. A day in our village, and he was out tripping over booby-traps in forbidden ships. Aang is *never* going to sit still long enough to get you guys."

Piandao nodded. "That sounds like a problem."

"And I'm supposed to be the idea guy." Sokka knuckled his head, hoping to jar loose a plan.

"Idea guy?" Piandao arched an eyebrow.

"Katara's the last waterbender of our tribe. Toph's the greatest earthbender in the world. Aang? He's the Avatar." Sokka shrugged. "I come up with ideas. Sometimes they work. Outside of that, I've got Boomerang." Touching the weapon behind his back finally jarred something loose. "Wait. Drowning, Zuko - you're the guy who uses chi to fight!"

Piandao leaned back a little, head raised with a skeptical tilt. "Who told you that?"

"Zuko," Sokka admitted. "He said I should - um. Never mind, we already screwed up, I should get everybody out of here before Aang tells Temul she didn't see what she did..." Darn it, he had to ask. "Is General Iroh right? Did waterbenders really use swords once?"

"The art of the sword belongs to no one nation," Piandao stated. "That said, yes. The Kyoshi Warriors favor the katana, but the longsword is still taught on Kyoshi Island. Temul learned from them long ago. She's been one of my teachers over the years."

"She taught us about ground fires when that meteor came down," Sokka recalled. "Do you think, maybe... no, she doesn't want anything to do with Aang."

"You're not Aang." Piandao gave him a speculative look. "Swordsmanship requires kansatsusuru, and you do need that. But chi... that requires a living teacher." He waved toward Boomerang. "Show me."

Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Kuei peered up at the stone ceiling, watching the Dai Li and Amisi coordinate on top of pillars they'd raised to reach overhanging stone. "So, if I have this right... she's going to bend sand into glass? I didn't know anyone could do that."

"It has to be the right kind of sand." Eshe watched just as intently, scratching behind Bosco's ear when the bear whuffed at her. "And you have to have sunlight. If the Dai Li hadn't made openings all the way to the surface, this wouldn't work."

Openings his agents had been very dubious about making, even if they could reinforce the stone so the ceiling was even stronger than before. They were fairly sure the Fire Nation wouldn't search this area of the city for tiny holes; they were not *absolutely* sure.

But they were willing to try this anyway. At least half the refugees belowground were of the blood of Fire, and even if they'd chosen Kuei as their lord, they *missed* sunlight.

I miss it, too, Kuei admitted to himself. The green crystals gave light, but it wasn't the same. And that wasn't just his opinion. All their elder healers were adamant that the children couldn't stay underground forever. Growing bones *needed* light.

Kuei had confirmed that in his own books, and their fledgling earth-healers added a final seal of agreement. It wasn't just the children. Without the sun, everyone's health was slipping.

Eshe's people, Guanyin bless them, had an answer.

"Airbenders who live underground," Kuei said to himself. "No wonder no one ever found you."

"Air and sandbenders." Eshe gave him a look like a sparrowkeet considering the merits of more seeds versus flight. "Our caverns aren't like this. The sandstorms' full force never enters, but sometimes the wind howls down the chambers like a thunderstorm, and you can see stones glow blue in the darkness, casting sparks to any fur..." She looked into memory, gray eyes wide with wonder.

"That sounds exciting," Kuei ventured. It was the most he'd heard of the Touzaikaze homeland since they'd arrived. "But are you supposed to be telling me this? Your people have kept their secrets a long time."

"Is that why you didn't ask?"

Sometimes, Kuei was really glad he wore glasses. If he'd stared right into those earnest gray eyes without any shield... well, he wasn't sure what he would have done. She was just - well - *pretty* didn't fit, not really. The noble ladies of Ba Sing Se were pretty. Looking at Eshe was like sneaking to a palace window to watch a thunderstorm roll in. Tasting the wind, and knowing it came from somewhere else. Seeing the gray slant of a downpour far across the city, long before the rain could dampen palace stone... "Your eyes are like the rain."

...And maybe the earth could just swallow him now? Please? Where was a Dai Li when he *needed* one? "I mean, I'm sorry, I know the sandbenders don't like rain, you call it *dead water*, I'm sorry-"

"I like rain."

"-Because living water is wells, and that's- you do?" Kuei blinked at her, feeling like a cat-owl caught out at noon.

"Rain feeds our river, Sarasvati," Eshe nodded. "It just rains very far away."

"...You have a river?"

"She comes from the mountains, far away." Eshe sketched her tale in the air with flicking fingers. "Our stories say the mountain trappers called it the Ghost River, because it vanished into the earth. But a long time ago, Ancestress Kamut wondered if that was true. Was the water taken by the spirits, or did it only travel where we could not follow? So she took her bison to the thirsty earth, and felt for water."

Kuei blinked. Took off his glasses to polish them with the sleeve of his robe. Looked at Eshe again, wondering if he'd read those motions of flowing hands correctly. "She was a *waterbender*?"

"She was a snow-child from the North," Eshe told him. "The stories say a long time ago, things were different there."

"Different." Kuei shook his head at the magnitude of that understatement.

"It took years, but she traced the river under the sands to where it surfaced again, in the Caverns of the Winds," Eshe went on. "The river carves the caverns, and the stone protects the river from the sand's thirst. It's beautiful. But it was guarded."

Kuei watched her hands flicker through the ancient thorn-mazes of protection. "By a spirit?"

"We call her the river, but her heart beats with the mist beading stone," Eshe nodded. "*As I live hidden, so will you*, she said. *Bring me tales of the world beyond stone, and I will be content*. And so we did." Her hands sketched a flight of arrows, loosed. "So when the White Wind swept over the world, we had a home to hide in."

"The White Wind." Kuei put together fragments of lore, and frowned. "Violent Air Nomads. That's still hard to imagine."

"So are the tornado, the sandstorm, hard to imagine," Eshe observed. "I've heard of the hurricanes that strike to the west, and I'm not sure I can imagine them. Storms so large you could not fly across them in a day and night; so fierce, you'd be a fool to try. The White Wind would come, and raid, and burn what they did not want, to spread more grasslands for their herds." Gray eyes were sad. "They pierced the hands and feet of benders who opposed them, and roped them to their bison as living shields."

"Oma and Shu." Kuei shuddered. "Who could fight that?"

"The Fire Nation."

Kuei thought of that, and a train crashed into Ba Sing Se's harbor, and the general his Dai Li said had held the city under siege for six hundred days. "...Oh."

"And you," Eshe nodded. "When we saw what you had done here, I knew our shamans were right. That you were a true king, who cared for his people."

"By killing them?" Kuei said bleakly. Quan and Bon *told* him what the Dai Li were doing on his

orders. And their results. Though the agents fiercely insisted that reports wait until *after* he'd had some sleep. They refused to wake him for anything short of an actual emergency.

"And I hate to say it, sir, but people dying in Fire Nation reprisals is *not* an emergency," Agent Quan had bluntly stated. "If there's anything we can do about it, my agents are already acting. If there's not... I'm *sorry*, your majesty. There are only so many of us. And we still have to keep the spirits to a low roar, or everyone might die."

"Yes," Eshe said now. "I am a healer. Sometimes, to save the body, the flesh must be cut. When you act, despite them - you do as my elders say the Fire-archers did ages past, when they shot. You *will not* be stopped by violence toward the innocent. That is the only way to save lives in the future."

Kuei swallowed dryly. "Agent Bon said... something like that."

"I know it's cold comfort, sir," Bon had told him a few days ago, after a particularly bloody night, "but we're starting to see some interesting patterns in the Fire Army responses. A few of their officers are keeping the deaths to a minimum. They're executing saboteurs, absolutely - but they're doing everything they can to avoid the decimation orders. There's a Captain Sanya overseeing the trains by the Wall, a Master Sergeant Yakume in the dockside of the Outer Ring..."

It was unsettling, having the names of the sane men among your enemies. On the one hand he was glad to know even Fire soldiers could still be human. On the other... part of him had to wonder if they should be his first targets. If his people *knew* that every red uniform was an enemy...

He was horrified that he could even think that. But he *had* to. Ba Sing Se was bleeding. He had to make the right choices. Even if... they were *horrible* choices.

No. No, I won't order that. Those men are trying to be human in the middle of hell. I won't see them killed for that.

Instead, he was going to gamble. And pray. It was an awful gamble. It made him sick just thinking about it. But he had to try.

Treat my people like human beings, and I'll leave you alone.

The object, after all, wasn't to wipe out the Fire Army. It was to tie them down. Harass them. Make holding Ba Sing Se so costly in men and supplies, the Fire Lord didn't *have* forces to throw against the Avatar.

And they could do plenty of that in districts where the officers *were* vicious madmen.

"I hate people dying," Kuei blurted out. "I've only known we were at war a few months now. And I hate it." He winced. "It sounds so small. Everyone else grew up knowing there was a war..." Something green moved near the ceiling; Kuei glanced up, saw an agent had just shifted a little, and let out a breath of relief. "Everyone except the Avatar. He seems to be a happy young boy, but - it must be awful for him."

"If it's hard for you, it must be worse for a child?" Eshe had a glimmer of a smile.

"Well - yes?" Kuei hazarded. "I don't really know much about children."

"Sometimes they can be more resilient than adults," Eshe informed him. "I had to be, when the Owl drove us from the cool river to the sands. We still had the oasis where the river drained, we weren't as destitute as some of the tribes, but it was hard. Some of us died."

"Why?" Kuei wondered. "He's a knowledge spirit. Why would he try to destroy your tribe?"

"Those who speak to the wind say something promised him great knowledge, knowledge no human had possessed in uncounted ages, if he would let us wither in the sands," Eshe stated. "But we would not die. The wind told us where the locust-beetles would fall; the sand where the water hid, so we could draw it out. We did *not* die."

Her knuckles were white. Daring, Kuei took her hand. "I'm glad I helped. I just... I wish I'd known enough to do it before."

"Earth is strong." Eshe didn't pull away. "But a badger-mole alone can't see very far." She nodded toward the ceiling. "It doesn't have to be that way."

Amisi made a motion like leaves swirling in a hot wind, sand spiraling up and out of sight...

Light.

Kuei took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, thinking it had to be his imagination. Little prickles of gold in green shadows, like sparks in a spirit-haunted night. And then more, and more; light dappling down like sun through a thick canopy of trees.

It wasn't bright. It felt like standing in deep shade, without the full warmth of noon. But it was *sunlight*.

Whuffling approval, Bosco lumbered forward, gold and shadow playing over his fur. Flopped into the middle of sun-spots, and rumbled a happy groan.

"Kamut left us water's gift," Eshe said proudly, as awed onlookers pressed forward, letting light sink into thirsty skin. "Waterbenders know they can change what water *is*, not just its shape. And even in earth and air - so can we."

"Waterbenders melt ice," Kuei muttered, fitting the pieces together. "She *can* melt sand... spirits. No wonder you're not afraid of the Fire Nation attacking the desert." If his Dai Li's pit traps were effective in Ba Sing Se, how much more would glass-ceilinged pits be in the endless dunes? "I know an earthbender who'd love to learn what you do. I wish I could send one of you to teach her. The Avatar needs every advantage he can get..."

The Dai Li were coming down now, tired but satisfied. Agent Quan spoke a few words to some of the first earthbenders to come down with them, then nodded, and made his way through the delighted crowd to his king. "I'm still not sure how she did it, your majesty. It was as if she were *spinning* the sand, like koala-sheep wool." Shaking his head, he glanced up at the ceiling again. "But it's solid work. It'll hold. And I have to say, having daylight down here will make our work much easier." He grimaced. "There are too many spirits who feed on darkness. And on our hate for it."

"I remember," Kuei whispered. He didn't remember much; he'd only been four. But he knew. It was one of the reasons he'd let Long Feng have such a free hand. He *knew* the Dai Li were needed.

I shouldn't have done that. I should have asked more questions. Pressed harder. Asked you to tell me...

But if I did - would you have answered? Or just found another way to get what you wanted?

He didn't know. It hurt, not knowing.

Eshe reached out, but didn't quite reclaim his grasp. "What's wrong?"

Oma and Shu. Where to start? "A few weeks ago, Princess Azula killed one of my most trusted advisors," Kuei said quietly. "He'd betrayed me to use her. He'd been betraying me for years. But I still miss him."

"And now you have an alliance with his killer's brother," Eshe nodded. "So you wonder if you've betrayed him, too." At Quan's studiously neutral look, she added, "I am a healer, Agent Quan. Flesh won't heal if the mind is not willing. Betray the living, and we know they may forgive us. Betray the dead?" She shook her head.

The agent pondered that, frowning. "He was your advisor, sir. But he was our leader. I still don't understand why he thought he could use the Fire Princess and not have her turn on him. Girl or not, she's Fire royalty, and tales say those nobles are vicious as a nest of scorpion-vipers. But before she came, he led us to protect Ba Sing Se, and you. That's why you made an alliance with Prince Zuko, isn't it, sir? To protect our people." Quan lowered his head, casting his gaze into thoughtful shadow. "The leader I trusted would never have been betrayed by that."

It ought to help. Really. And maybe it would, someday. But Kuei still remembered being four years old in the dark, with the Dai Li guarding him until dawn. He'd trusted Long Feng.

Now I have to trust myself. Amaya never let me down. I have to believe Lee won't, either.

The prince had kept his word so far. The rumors kept getting wilder - he *really* didn't think Zuko's rag-tag fleet had fought off a swarm of kraken-orcas - but the facts they could sift out of the stories seemed clear. Zuko was heading north, picking up war refugees on the way. And the Fire Navy seemed to be tripping over itself figuring out what to do about it.

What was *not* rumor was the chilling message passed to the Dai Li by someone they *knew* gathered information for the Fire Nation. A very thick stack of a message, most of it in Professor Tingzhe Wen's verifiable hand.

Zuko's addendum to that was short, but enough to give Kuei nightmares.

Eleven hundred years ago, Avatar Yangchen and her yāorén were murdered. We found the volcano the Face-Stealer used to do it. We're going to stop him.

Half the world away. There was nothing Ba Sing Se could do. Kuei *knew* that. *I just wish I knew what was happening!* "Agent Quan. Is there any news?"

"We're working on it, sir," Quan said sympathetically. "It's not always easy to get people past Princess Azula's agents. Though whoever Prince Zuko's made contact with on the Fire Nation side, they're *good*. They've got some of the most bizarre ways of getting information through..." He craned his head to look over the crowd. "Agent Bon's made it back."

"I'm surprised you could get him to leave." Kuei smiled a little, watching Amisi being cheered by the crowd. "He takes looking after me pretty seriously. And I thought... well, I'm probably wrong..."

"You're not." Eshe's smile was bittersweet. "That's why he's been taking more missions above. He knows his duty. Just as Amisi knows hers, to you and our tribe."

Oh. That made his breath catch, in a way all the pomp and danger and spirits in his life as the Earth King couldn't. This was two brave people, people he *knew*, putting duty ahead of their own hearts. Because of him.

No. not me. Because Ba Sing Se needs the Earth King. Kuei sighed. "I told your Uncle Runihura that any alliance with the Touzaikaze does not depend on... um. Personal arrangements."

"He doesn't believe you," Eshe shrugged. "In the desert, all ties come down to blood."

"Then he didn't listen when I told him of Ba Sing Se," Kuei said firmly. "The royal family is the heart of Ba Sing Se. If my parents had been miserable, it would have hurt the whole city. I need a wife who can face the spirits. But someone unwilling? I can't do that. I won't."

"You should tell her that." Eshe's eyes searched his, looking for... spirits, he wished he knew. He'd give it to her, if he could. "She needs to hear it from you."

"I will," Kuei promised. He noticed Quan was still standing there, studiously looking anywhere else. Though the faint smile on the agent's face said he wasn't above listening. "So where should I look to find you a wife, Agent Quan? I have to admit, after hearing Healer Eshe's tales of her ancestress, I'm tempted to forward a letter to Prince Zuko asking to open diplomatic relations with the Northern Water Tribe. Healer Amaya can't be the only adventurous soul up there."

Quan blinked. Twice. "...Sir?"

Eshe hid her giggles behind her hand. "Now you can walk in *our* sandals for a while."

Quan glanced between them. Straightened his shoulders, and peered over the crowd again. "I think Agent Bon has something... I'll be right back, your majesty."

"I think that was a strategic retreat," Kuei observed, trying not to giggle himself. Oh, the look on Quan's *face*.

"He's very focused," Eshe agreed. But her eyes still danced. "You're right, you know. Amisi is like the drifting sands; someone like her might wear him down, but neither of them would be happy. Agent Quan needs someone much more traditional."

"Now there's an idea," Kuei said half to himself, walking over to scratch Bosco where the bear lolled in the light. His friend leaned into it, groaning with *just* the right bit scratched. "Throw all the noble young ladies at my Dai Li instead of me... No, really!" he added, as Eshe wrinkled her nose. "Maybe most of the nobles wouldn't be interested. But some *might*."

"Your majesty!" Agent Bon hurried through the crowd, grinning fiercely. "You don't want to know how we got this, but - there's news!"

Kuei took the feather-light pale silk; rolled up no thicker than his thumb, yet unfolding into a long skein of inked characters. By now he could recognize Shirong's strokes, sharp as a stone-block print.

Earth King Kuei, 52nd in the royal line of Ba Sing Se, may this find you in good health and spirits,

Sir. Let me humbly remind you one more time to consider your precise wording when dealing with the Fire Nation. Otherwise, you may be... surprised. It's not always a bad surprise, but it's generally alarming.

I'm certain you recall the area negotiated, and that the ledgers of the Earth Kingdom note it as almost entirely unpopulated, aside from the refugees in the Northern Air Temple. In this letter I'll cover some of the reasons why it's unpopulated, and why I believe you made a very fair bargain. In short, sir - between the climate and the wildlife, you'd have to be crazy to want to live up here.

And that doesn't even get into the volcano.

Let me tell you about Asagitatsu...

Earth shoes unnaturally steady on the pitched ground, Shirong gave Langxue a hand up to the ledge the four of them had picked as a good place to halt and assess the terrain. "So that's Asagitatsu?"

"Looks like," Saoluan shrugged, still catching her breath from the scramble as she eyed the black rock mound near the head of the ragged valley. Wisps of steam hung around it, source of the warm winds that funneled up to the Northern Air Temple, but as yet there was no hint of sulfur in the air. The warrior planted hands on her hips, tilting her head back for a good look. "I thought it would be bigger."

Zuko gauged the low cone with too many decades' experience murmuring in the back of his head. *Low* being a relative term in this spine of mountains; four thousand feet if it was an inch, yet just a foothill compared to the fourteen-thousand-foot peaks ranked around the Air Temple. If it hadn't been for the vast valley cradling it, as if someone had scooped a thirty-mile hole in the flesh of the earth, you wouldn't even have known it was there.

They're not from the Fire Nation. They don't know.

"Do you want to give them the bad news, or should I?" Langxue said wryly.

A deep breath, and Saoluan scowled at them. "What bad news?"

"Don't be too hard on them. I missed it the first time I was here," Zuko admitted. Peered eastward, where black specks of gliders fluttered over the Air Temple's peak. "On the edge of disaster, and not a clue it's coming."

"They know we're here." Shirong plucked absently at a brown hem, obviously missing his uniform. "The reports said they had bombs?"

"Mostly annoyance stuff. A few dangerous ones." Zuko squinted at the Temple, recalling everything he could of the Mechanist, his band of refugees, and how both might have met Aang's little group. "Aang left them here, in his people's home. He must think they're good people. Which means they don't use force except as a last option. They probably hope we'll see them up there and just go away."

Fists on her hips, Saoluan eyed him. "You don't think much of peaceful people, do you?"

"I don't think much of a man who lets his people *think* they're peaceful, while he designs war machines for the Fire Nation," Zuko said harshly. "Every day they were up there he lied to them all. Even his son." He shook his head, tamping down the pulse of fury. "Teo's crippled. He's not stupid. What did Ji think he'd do when he found out the truth?"

Langxue grimaced. Saoluan and Shirong traded glances, the warrior making a *go ahead* motion. "He probably didn't want to think that far ahead," the agent said plainly. "No one wants their children to think less of them."

Zuko raised the brow he had left.

"No one sane," Shirong allowed. "But I see your point. A man willing to lie about that isn't the most trustworthy neighbor. Much less a good partner in an alliance." He inclined his head. "I don't

like it either. We'll watch him." He gestured at the steaming cone. "So what are we missing?"

"I guess it's easier to see if you know the depth soundings," Zuko said wryly.

Langxue snickered. "Fire Nation."

"Huh?" Zuko tilted his head, befuddled.

"If you ever need to hide again, don't let anyone ask you for directions," Langxue elaborated. "Everybody else does flat maps."

"Flat maps?" Shirong said carefully.

"I *know*," Zuko grumbled. "You'd think captured enemy maps would be useful. But *no*. They've got roads and buildings and camp locations, sure, but elevations? Hah! You have to send a surveyor with every scout party; 'a little steep' covers everything from a slight incline to mountain-goat trails..." Belatedly, he saw Shirong and Saoluan's dark looks; the warrior's sharp-edged, while the agent's had more of an air of bemused tolerance. "...Sorry."

"Sometimes you have a rather unique perspective," Shirong said judiciously. "How steep it is really makes that much difference?" He frowned, thinking. "Oh. Of course it does. You can't move troops and supplies with earthbending. It has to be engines, or muscle power." He looked around the encircling peaks again. "But what does how high mountains are have to do with how deep the water is? Much less a volcano."

"Let me show you." Langxue streamed some water out of his waterskin, forming a rough, elongated bowl of water that froze with a gentle push.

"Lopsided," Saoluan pointed out.

"It's supposed to be," Zuko put in. "Look. There's the cliff walls around this valley." He brushed the highest edge. "Here's the growing cone." A lump of ice in the middle, a bit of fog drifting off it in the summer sun. "High tide is here," he etched a line midpoint on the slanted bowl's rim. "And... stretch this out a little more, right... here's the deep harbor, where we set the fires. And this rim all the way out here is that shallow part Captain Jee was nervous about getting over. Our draft's a lot less than that, but if another big ship had gone down here and we didn't know about it - might have gotten sticky."

Shirong stared at the ice. Whipped his head up to look at the rough, half-oval shrub-spotted stone wall they'd climbed halfway up. Down again, at the loamy, ashy soil at his feet, obviously the result of centuries of greenery. "...No."

"Oh, yes," Zuko smirked.

"But - that - you *didn't*!"

"I did tell you," Zuko said wryly.

"*On* a volcano!" Shirong shouted. "You said *on*! This is not on! This is the utter and complete opposite of on!"

"With something this big?" Zuko shrugged. "It really doesn't matter."

"You... gah!" Shirong flung up his hands, sputtering to the skies.

"So... we're not living on a volcano?" Saoluan said warily.

Pointing to the cone, Langxue's grin would have terrified a leopard-shark. "That's not Asagitatsu." He waved his hand at the massive stone bowl that cupped the valley and harbor, as if a monstrous dragon had raked the mountains to let the sea surge in. "*This* is Asagitatsu."

Saoluan swallowed, gripping her swordhilt. "I picked a heck of a day not to bring a drink..."

"Sis?" Langxue lost the grin. "Are you okay?"

Two strides, and Saoluan crushed him in a hug. "I'm going to keep it together. I will. Just - tell me something. Because I'm not brave. Not with something this big." She eased her grip. "This mountain, this... *thing*. It killed an Avatar. It killed *you*. Tell me we've got a chance."

"We've got a chance," Langxue obliged. "Maybe a better one than I thought." He glanced at Zuko. "This place is *watching* you."

Huh. He'd thought he felt prickly. But he'd also thought he knew why. Stepping to the edge, Zuko pitched his voice to carry. "And I thought that was the lieutenant."

"Not funny, sir," drifted up from a particularly thick patch of brush.

"Didn't you tell Captain Jee," Shirong started.

"Yes. I told him I'd be fine," Zuko sighed. "I told *Uncle* I'd be fine. It's not like *I'm* the one who got taken prisoner by the Earth Army. I had to track *him* down, and I did. One komodo-rhino, and me, in the middle of the Earth Kingdom. I *think* I can handle a day hike with some experienced benders..." Wait. He'd heard that faint buzz before-

Rattle-viper!

Blaze, loop, *snatch-*

His flame-net lifted out a diamond-patterned rope of muscle, scales gleaming red-brown and iridescent blue. Teruko's pale face was visible through seared leaves as he tugged the creature toward him. "Sir? What is *that*?"

"Trappers call it a rattle-viper." Zuko brought it up to the ledge, cursing himself for an idiot. "Damn it, I *knew* I was forgetting something... Get up here, Lieutenant. Sometimes they're not alone."

Armor barely creaking, Teruko scrambled up onto their ledge. Joined the rest of them gathered close, but not too close, to what he'd caught. "That's not a snake!"

"You know that, and I know that. Try telling the locals." Zuko eyed the six stubby legs along the long coil of scales; more clawed flippers than anything else. "Most of the time they're underground. I think they hunt pika-squirrels. But they like to warm up on big rocks like this. Or sometimes branches, if they're close to the ground."

Teruko looked back at the thicket she'd been hiding in. Winced. Rounded on him. "*Sir...*"

"I forgot!" Zuko said defensively. "It tried to kill me, it didn't; it was a few years ago. I forgot. They don't want to bite you, Lieutenant. They just get confused. Hear that?" The blue-patterned tail thrashed against binding flames; a buzz like a cricket-mouse, but deeper. "That's, you're annoying me, back off or I'll bite."

"Do I want to know exactly how you know that?" Shirong had a familiar bemused look, as though he could already guess the answer.

He wanted to sink into the stone, or burst into flames. Given he was still pinning down an annoyed rattle-viper, he did neither. "It was only a few months after I was exiled," Zuko said stiffly. "I didn't know how bad my left eye was then. I didn't see it." He crouched down, pointing with his free right hand. "And he didn't really see you, Lieutenant. See those eyes? Blind as a badger-mole. All he knew was that you were big and warm. He thought you were going to eat him."

"Don't tempt me," Teruko grinned. "We could bring him back for Asahi."

Zuko smirked. "She's probably hunting them out of the landing right now."

"Ostrich-horses eat snakes?" Saoluan eyed them, waiting for the joke.

"They love snakes," Shirong told her. "We have to keep them away from the granaries in Ba Sing Se, or the rats get to be a problem." He frowned. "It thought she was *warm*?"

"They don't usually bother people," Zuko shrugged. "Firebenders... we're a little warmer. I think they think we're snow tigers." He thought about that. "Langxue? Give me a ball of water. A small one."

Brows raised, Langxue tossed him a shimmering globe. "You've already got it trapped."

"Just watch." Zuko heated the water in his right hand, not quite to steaming. "You might want to back up a little."

There was suddenly empty space all around him. Zuko fought the urge to roll his eyes - you'd think he'd said he was about to do something *dangerous* - and cast the ball in front of the rattle-viper.

Tongue flicking silently, the scaled head oriented on the water.

Careful, be ready to grab it again if you have to... Gingerly, Zuko let flames fade.

The scaled length lunged, fangs sinking into water a brief second before it let go, tail twitching in excitement.

"Doesn't look like a pika-squirrel. Doesn't smell like one, or move like one. All I can guess is that it's the heat." Zuko watched black venom swirl in the hot globe. "I did something like this with fire once. Let's see if this works a little better." Twitching his fingers, he swooped the globe off the rock and over the side.

Wriggling fast, the rattle-viper followed.

Trickier when you can't see what you're bending, Zuko noted, guiding the water he felt. *Let's try...* He thrust a hand out, rigid as water crackling into ice.

Heh heh heh...

Smirking, Zuko brought a frozen globe back to them, studying the dark streaks in pale ice. "I bet he's wondering where dinner went." He tossed the iceball in his hand. "Think we can bring this back to Amaya? I remember her scrolls say it's easier to bend out a poison if you know what it feels like."

"Give me that." Langxue snatched the venom-ice away before it could land again, shaking his

head. "Why do dragons always have to *poke* things?"

"It's our job," Zuko said innocently. Shidan's memory-tale had been clear on that. "Agni can't be everywhere. So we have to poke things for him. And then humans showed up-"

"And fire's never slowed down since," Langxue muttered. "Lucky for us, I guess. We'd be toast right now if Fire didn't *really like* humans." He nodded toward the harbor, where you could make out flickers of fire if you squinted. "The Face-Stealer has power over the drowned. He has to come at us through the sea. For now, you've got that blocked. But it won't hold long." He swept his gaze over them. "We need Asagitatsu on our side, and we need her *now*."

Shirong folded his arms. "We were going to just scout the ground today."

Langxue rolled stained ice between his fingers. "That was before we got jumped by something lethal."

"The rattle-vipers live here," Zuko argued. "It could have happened to anyone."

"But it happened to Teruko." Langxue jabbed a finger her way. "When she's in your service. The Face-Stealer knows we're here. Makoto's *going* to know we're here. We have to move *now*."

Face the spirits. Without Uncle. Mouth dry, Zuko could only shake his head.

"We have to," Langxue said, more gently. "I know you two have never done this before. But I have." He tapped a foot on the ledge. "We're in Asagitatsu's power, but not too close; this is as good as we can get and not be rude. We've got Makoto's blood with us. We've got a yāorén of Earth and Fire. And we've got two warriors to watch our bodies while we're out. We're not going to get a better shot."

Shirong gave him a sober look. "How many yāorén fought Asagitatsu the last time?"

"That's just it. We *fought* her," Langxue said grimly. "We *lost*. This time...we have to find another way." He met pale gold. "I hear you're good at that."

Agni. They'd discussed dealing with the volcano-spirit, hashed it out over and over on the long cruise here. But he thought he'd have more time.

"Fire Navy marines, sir," Teruko murmured. "The difficult we do immediately..."

"The impossible takes a little longer," Zuko finished. *She's counting on you. They all are.* "How do we start?"

A/N: The Mongol use of human shields, and particularly hand-piercing, is historically attested to by several sources, including those on the Mongol invasions of Japan. For a samurai's view of the invasions, you might be interested in the picture scrolls commissioned by Takazaki Suenaga, the Mōko Shūrai Ekotoba.

I'm told most people don't have much experience with agriculture, particularly what's required for large grazers. So I thought people might be interested in a little background on why Temul was not just "chasing off trespassers" from her domain.

The conflict between nomads and settled peoples goes back as least as long as there have been cities. They have dramatically opposed ways of exploiting their environment to make a living. Settled people almost always depend on plant protein and calories for most of their diet.

(Northwest Coast salmon-gatherers were a rare exception.) Nomads depend on animal protein from their herds, and sometimes grain they trade for (or extort, see Mongols) out of settled peoples. Nomad herds graze, and the nomads harvest meat, milk, and other products.

So when two people look at a cultivated field, a settled person sees food growing - food they plan to put on their table, there's a limit to how much surplus you can produce without modern techniques. A nomad, however, sees a place to graze his herd. These two uses are generally not compatible. For more modern history you might look into the range wars of the American West and the invention of barbed wire.

Now add to that the fact that sky bison can fly. Fencing your crops isn't going to help.

On top of that, nomads and settled people have very different ideas of *property*. To a settled person, it usually includes their house, their land, their crops; a right of possession generally demarcated by some kind of boundary, property line, what have you. To a nomad, you own what you carry with you. Which means if a nomad finds something they want that's not nailed down, they take it. If they can get it loose with a crowbar, it's not nailed down.

Across the world, to settled people, nomads are thieves. To a nomad, settled people are wimps.

Canon, Air monks and nuns were not thieves. But something we see Aang do over and over again is turn Appa loose to graze. The way Appa demolishes haystacks and bales, that's kind of like turning an elephant loose. Which would be a conservative estimate of Appa's energy costs; something that big ought to be eating a lot more.

Now picture a small party of Air Nomads - say, a dozen - landing near someone's farm to graze.

To a subsistence-level farmer, the damage done by even a handful of elephants in one day means the difference between a good year and starving to death. It only takes a few incidents to turn a settlement's mood from toleration to torches and pitchforks. Add to that the fact that, given their druthers, the dragons would eat the bison. Large herbivores in their territory, that don't belong to their humans, who are eating their crops? That's a no-brainer. And all it takes is a few instances of that to wind up with angry, heartbroken nomads.

Bottom line: unless there's a lot of space between settlements and nomads, or good leadership on both sides, peaceful coexistence is not going to happen.

Chapter End Notes

One phenomenon not always recognized in genocides is the rescue. For some reason, even in a world gone horribly wrong, there are people who will risk their lives, fortunes, everything they value to prevent atrocity. This has been studied, particularly in Europe in WWII. Researchers came to a startling conclusion.

Rescuers don't start with noble intentions.

In cases when those rescued actually survived, rescuers had no intentions of doing anything as noble and selfless as saving someone's life. They believed they were simply ordinary, everyday people, faced with a choice: if I do this, now, I can help.

If I leave the dinner leftovers by the shed, where someone is hiding. If I stamp this set of papers, when I know it was faked. If I say this is my second cousin from out of town, I'm sure there's just been a misunderstanding...

None of these people deliberately set out to defy the law, their own society, and their own beliefs. Yet all of them ended up doing just that. Because of one key event, one "trigger": This is another human being in trouble. And I can help.

Temul is modeled after a few of these real-life rescuers, particularly a rather crotchety French countess: arrogant, bigoted, with most of the other unlovely traits Temul has. Who nevertheless was responsible for saving dozens of people. The scenario in the story - Kuzon and Shidan dropping out of the sky to beg one of the few people they could trust who could get there in time - is also modeled on how many real-life rescuers got dragged in. A friend of a friend, who needs help. No one else can do this. Please.

You don't have to be a saint to save the world. You don't even have to be nice; accounts of organized crime in WWII are fascinating reading, and Han Solo has many historical counterparts. Sometimes, all you have to be is the right person in the right place, with your eyes open.

I'll take that over a saint, any day.

Chapter 53

Walk. Look. Keep your eyes open; what the heck does a volcano-spirit even look like?

It was an effort just to look; the air was clammy on Zuko's skin, mist and shadows everywhere. Which made no sense. Asagitatsu was a dragon's home. Where was the sun?

Walk. Look. This isn't safe for any of us. Wouldn't be, even if the Face-Stealer wasn't planning something...

Zuko stepped as quietly as he could on the black sand of the boundary's shore, trying not to stir the spirit-mists too much. Helped that he wasn't in armor... or the sandals he'd climbed in this morning. Instead he was in the Blue Spirit's soft boots, dressed in near-black from head to toe, and he just *knew* this outfit was going to be trouble.

Behind him, Shirong ghosted over wet sand in earth shoes, Dai Li uniform as oddly dark as Zuko's own outfit. The rim of his hat burned with faint blue foxfire, and the man was obviously holding onto his nerves with both hands.

Ahead, mist eddied around the only one of them who looked halfway comfortable here. Langxue's past lives were a dim blue-gold haze around him, yet the Kyoshi robes he wore were just as inexplicably midnight-dark as theirs. "This way," the waterbender murmured.

Zuko scowled. "How do you know?" His voice didn't sound right. He *hated* that. "We're walking down a shoreline. We can't-"

"Don't say *can't*." But Langxue sounded as much amused as forbidding. "This isn't the living world. Anywhere can be anywhere. The shore *will* take us to Asagitatsu. Because we need it to, and because we are yāorén."

Zuko's scowl deepened. "Bending two elements doesn't mean much where you *can't bend*."

"You don't believe in much, do you?" Langxue looked out into the misty dark, where the shush of waves lapped the shore. "She's out there."

"So's a lot of other stuff we don't want to see," Zuko muttered. "Just wait. Next thing you know, we'll be climbing the Southern Mountains in a thunderstorm."

"Somehow, that wouldn't surprise me," Shirong said, just as low.

Zuko glanced at him. "Are you alright?"

"I want my chains." Shirong patted his sleeves absently. "I want them quite a bit, and I don't seem to have them. And we're somewhere none of us can bend. There's a certain degree of comfort in knowing you can slam a rock wall between you and the kamuiy trying to eat your face. I miss it."

"Hit them with your hat," Zuko suggested.

"Your sense of humor knows no lower bounds," Shirong said dryly.

"I'm serious. It looks like Azula's fire is still on it-"

Oh, he could have kicked himself. Naming names was always a bad idea around spirits. Naming Azula when they weren't trying to find her?

Langxue halted with a strangled curse, as mist glittered with foxfire. The wind shifted, bringing a scent of brimstone.

Damn it, I knew this was going to be bad. Why didn't Langxue give us any details-

Wait. A threat from the shore? When the spirit world itself was supposed to be across the water?

Koh and Makoto are deceivers.

His dao sang free, and waves crashed down.

"You're fretting."

Caught staring up the side of the caldera Zuko and his companions had ventured up, Iroh turned back to Amaya with a bemused smile. "A privilege of the aged."

"Oh?" She waved a hand at the rough settlement being carved above the marks of storm surge, and gave him a look full of mischief. "Strange. I haven't met that many *aged men* who could press enough weight to startle earthbenders." The waterbender chuckled. "Everyone has to help with unloading, hmm? I think you've cured most of the slackers."

Ah, yes. That had been the intended result. Though he had been hoping for a few more personal consequences.

Blue eyes twinkled at him, and Iroh tried not to grin too broadly. Well. Perhaps he'd succeeded in both goals.

"Men. So *transparent*."

Iroh raised gray brows, the picture of innocence.

"He'll be fine," Amaya said firmly, stepping closer. "He's armed, he's prepared, he's not alone-

"And the last time he was here, my nephew was bitten by something with venom and too many teeth, and I did not find him for two days," Iroh said plainly. "When I did find him, he had used fire to clean the bite, and was still moving slowly." He sighed. "He claimed to be fine then, as well."

"This time, he's not alone." Amaya took his arm. "Come on. Captain Donghai wants to talk to you."

"I fear I already know what for," Iroh murmured. But he let her draw him to the makeshift docks, regardless. Getting those built had been some hours of adventure in itself; Fire Nation experience in temporary pontoon docks warring with Ba Sing Se familiarity with shaped stone. In the end Zuko had put his foot down; they'd build at least *three* docks, one in each style and one combination of both. No one, the young prince had pointed out, truly knew this harbor well. It might be the best dock design was as yet undetermined.

Donghai's floating firetrap was moored at one of the Ba Sing Se docks. Iroh couldn't blame the man; best to work with what one knew. He also couldn't blame the other shipmasters who looked as if they wanted the craft *anywhere* else. Though any ship that impossibly fast couldn't be the near-wreck that it looked.

Donghai himself was on top of the weather-beaten deckhouse, watching with a wry smile as his crew unloaded some very familiar pottery jars. He glanced their way, mouth pressing into a grim line; waved to his first mate to carry on, then dropped to the deck and headed for the dock like the

tramp of doom.

Oh dear.

"You." Donghai wasn't trying to tower over him, but the Earth Kingdom captain had a good foot over his height and a very determined glare. "I never, *ever*, want to see another *Freedom Fighter* again, as long as I live."

Iroh looked politely interested. "Something went amiss with your passengers?"

"Oh, you could say that..."

Which opened the floodgates on a wild and gallant tale of an innocent ship sent on a course straight through hell. Contrary winds, evilly plotting mini-warriors, hacked-through locks, a poisoned galley, innocent men cozied up to by a charming demon in the form of a young rebel, and an onboard attempt at revolt that had summoned up a watery half-platypus-bear-half-strangleweed demon that had almost sent them all into the briny deep before a mad rescue force of seagoing nuns had roped the mystic menaces with prayer beads and chanted demons and rebels both into submission.

Iroh applauded. "Well told!"

"...You didn't believe a word of it," Donghai accused.

"Well..."

"The part about the nuns was *true*!"

"Of that I have no doubt," Iroh said graciously. "I have visited that abbey myself. They have the most delicious scents." He nodded toward the jars. "Which I am certain many of us would wish. But we may be short of funds."

"Actually," Donghai's voice dropped, and he glanced guiltily aside, "some of those are for your volcano."

"Excuse me?" Iroh tried not to smirk too widely.

"I said it's for your- Look. The abbess is *crazy*, okay? But she saved my neck, my ship, and my crew. I owe her one. She said it'd be worth our while." He glanced north, across the harbor to the ocean. "Something about getting in on trade up north? I hear they've got pelts and ivory nobody's seen in about a century... huh." Donghai shaded his eyes with a hand. "Saw your little gauntlet coming in, and didn't that give us all gray hairs. You could have told us when they go out."

A chill trickled down Iroh's spine. "They are not supposed to go out."

Swaying from foot to foot on stone-braced wood, Amaya suddenly looked ill. "The harbor. There's something wrong in the water."

"Get to shore!" Iroh commanded. "Now! Captain-"

Donghai was already leaping ahead, up on his ship with cutlass drawn. "Make ready to repel boarders!"

If that water takes us under, Shirong realized, we're dead.

That much, Langxue had briefed them on. An Avatar might wander the spirit world at will; a human couldn't. And yāorén *were* human, living bodies anchoring them to the living world. They might have the power to wade into the shallows, but crossing the waters would douse the flame of life within like a snuffed candle. Without a skilled healer to bring them back...

I am not going to die here!

Bending or not, the stance would help him stay standing, even as water-

Black sand surged, and waves shattered like ice against it.

What the...?

To his right, pale flames flickered, dancing on the dao that had slashed another wave away. Zuko's eyes were wide, and if Shirong hadn't seen him bend with splinters of stone stabbed in his chest, he'd have thought the young prince was about to faint.

"Sorry." Langxue stepped back toward them, subtle shoves of his fingers pushing dark water into mist. "You had to find that out for yourselves. This isn't the spirit world *or* the real world. You have to bend spirit as well as your element. If you're not desperate, it won't work." He kept his eyes on the waves. "I didn't think he'd find us so fast."

Silence across the sea. Ominous, brooding silence, punctuated by a waft of something that... spirits. Shirong had dealt with plague kamuï before. This was *worse*.

Langxue rolled his eyes. "Get serious. They're new. I've been here before. I know your stink."

"Well, well." A dark chuckle rolled out of the night. "If it isn't little Hyourin. But there's no fire in you. Why is that?"

"Get ready to duck," Langxue said under his breath. "Why do you care, you grain-eating mulberry-caterpillar thief? *We're* not drowned. And we're not going to be."

"Oh, brave words, little spirit-slave. Why don't you say them where I can *SEE YOU!*"

Langxue's arms slammed into a block, mist crackling into opaque white. In the waters behind it, something sinuous cursed.

"Guess you forgot. This isn't the Spirit Oasis," Langxue said coldly. "You can't come over here. And there's no way we're going over there."

A click of mandibles. "So rude. And the Avatar was such a *polite* little boy."

Langxue tensed, teal eyes dark.

Zuko touched his shoulder. "Don't let him get to you," the firebender murmured. "He takes what he knows and twists it, and makes you so mad you can't think. I know. Just focus on the mission."

Focus, Shirong thought, trying not to let his teeth chatter. *With the Face-Stealer just across a little water. Wonderful.*

"Yeah," Langxue breathed. "Thanks." He shook his head. "Go. Find the spirit. I'll keep him distracted."

"But," Zuko started.

"Go!"

Shirong traded a glance with Zuko. Took in the firebender's determined look, and gave him a brief nod.

Silent as mist, Zuko slipped into the shadows.

Langxue did a double-take, as Shirong nonchalantly stepped behind him. "What the hell do you think you're *doing*?" he hissed.

"Our friend is sneakier than I could ever be," Shirong murmured back. "And the way our neighbor talked about fire..." *You might need it.*

"You're both nuts," Langxue snarled under his breath.

"Don't you want to know what he asked, Hyourin?" Chitin snicked in the dark. "I suppose not. It must be shameful to know how much you've failed. How ignorant your poor, hapless Avatar is..."

"Thanks for telling me. I guess I owe you a gift," Langxue fired back. "And I know just the thing. I got it from my best friend, but I'll share it with you. Just like the *good neighbors* we are.

"Ninety-nine bottles of wine on the wall,

"Ninety-nine bottles of wine,

"Take one down, pass it around,

"Ninety-eight bottles of wine on the wall..."

Huddled behind ice, Shirong covered his ears against the howl.

"That's not what it looks like," Private Sukekuni said numbly, eyes wide as his squad dropped their guard on stacks of naval supplies to head for the screams. "I mean, it *can't* be what it looks like. Stuff like this just happens in spirit-tales..."

"You have exactly five more seconds to panic," Rikiya said wryly, gripping his shoulder. "Then, we've got to do something." He eyed the sergeant. "Boss? What do we do?"

"Moriaki, Shoni, get the civilians to higher ground," Sergeant Kyo ordered. "The further they get from the water, the weaker they should be. Fushi, with them; they're going to need you to fry anything that gets past us."

"*Suzuran*," Fushi protested, glancing toward their base ship with a jitter of panic.

"Is a lot better off than we are. They've got tar! Move, people! Get some earthbenders, and then-"

"Up the slope!" Tingzhe Wen ordered his children and anyone in hearing distance, one hand keeping his frightened youngest balanced on Asahi's back. "Away from the water!"

He didn't know if it would save them. Those... *things*... rising from the harbor weren't like any spirit he'd seen in Ba Sing Se. But if they came from the sea, they likely drew their strength from it. And distance couldn't hurt-

A shaft of sun filtered through the sudden mist, gleaming dully on rust-red armor as it lurched from the water. And another, and another...

Guanyin, protect us.

Standing at the railing above the anchor chain, Jee shook his head. *This can't be happening. It just can't...*

It was the gray that made his mind freeze like a South Pole iceberg. Jee was an officer. He'd seen enough combat to know what it did to frail human bodies. Shattered armor, gaping rents in flesh; even the inevitable ravages of sea life on eyes and lips and any other flesh sea and ice could liquefy. He knew the horrors of death.

But dead was dead. Dead flesh didn't *move*-

Freezing cold gripped the captain's ankle, and yanked.

Jee kicked out fire, suddenly furious at the whole world. The drowned were legends. Spirits were legends. The Avatar was a *legend*.

And legends had no place trying to *kill his crew!*

Sodden flesh didn't flinch, even as the blast knocked it loose. But an engineer's wrench dented the damned thing, breaking fingers that clung to the chain. The corpse peeled free, tumbling back into dark waters.

"Stay ready!" Jee barked. Swept a hand at shaken crew. "Weigh anchor! Reverse engines! Get some water under us! *Lieutenant!*"

"Sir!" Sadao was white-faced, but there.

"Remember my orders about you, tar, and anything else remotely flammable?" Jee pointed down the rising chain, where other sopping corpses were squirming to board them. "Forget everything I've ever said."

"Y-yes, sir!"

Jee turned his back as the flames started, tar slurping down the chain to catch and burn. Right now, Lieutenant Sadao's inadvertent pyrotechnics were the least of their problems. "Does anyone know what the *hell* we're facing?"

"The drowned." Meixiang held Jinhai from the other side now; all Asahi's mane and feathers were bristled, as the hen paced away from the harbor with a low, rattling hiss. "The unsanctified drowned - and there's so little here to burn them..."

Burn sea-soaked corpses. *That's not going to be easy*, Tingzhe thought darkly. "Does anything else stop them? What do they want?"

"*Us.*"

His wife was afraid. His beautiful, brave, determined Meixiang, who'd outlived Azulon's hunters and Ba Sing Se's disdain - was afraid.

Someone will pay for that.

"Suyin! Go with your mother. Get everyone you can away from the harbor," Tingzhe said firmly. "Jia-"

"I'm staying." Jia hiked up her robes, ready to run. Swallowed. But stayed.

"I rather thought you might." Tingzhe looked to his oldest as lurching bodies neared. "Min. I've survived a black night before, but you're the one who's trained for spirits."

"Walls," Min blurted out, suiting action to word with a stomping stance that shot rugged sandstone spikes up to catch in armor and rotting flesh. "Keep them back. Buy time..."

Jia took a deep breath, and clapped her hands together. Sandstone swirled up, locking boots in place-

Something slurped and tore, stained bones pulling free. Jia went white, frozen...

"Hah!" Tingzhe punched, a wave of sand knocking the footless creature back. But there were more, and more.

"Walls." He gripped his daughter's trembling hand, stood shoulder to shoulder with his grim, pale son. "Indeed. Now!"

Arms swept out as one, and sand *moved*.

Fire crackled over the bay as *Suzuran* fought off waves of corpses; arcs of bent flame, the head-swimming scent of burning tar, the sudden *boom* as sparks touched natural gas over the water. The ship was wreathed in her own flames, a blazing target to draw eyes of the quick and the dead alike.

Most eyes, Huojin thought grimly, forcing himself to breathe deep. *Not all*. "Away from the water, keep calm, *away* from the water," he repeated firmly, hurrying fellow refugees inland with voice and looks and the occasional shove. Thanking the spirits for Luli, who'd picked up Dayu and dragged Lim in her wake toward the last place they'd seen *Suzuran's* marines. He'd never be able to keep calm if his girls weren't heading for safety.

Please let them be there. I'm just a Guard; I'm not trained to fight spirits, damn it!

What a laugh. Spirits might be hurt by the sword at his side. Not easily, but he might stand a chance. What good was steel against the walking dead?

The world is wrong. The world is all wrong-

"This way, young man!"

Corporal Moriaki; Huojin had never, ever been so glad to see red armor. The medic had a small girl clinging to his shoulder, but balanced as if she weighed no more than a feather. Shoni and Private Fushi darted past them both; Shoni grim, Fushi bouncing and wide-eyed with determination.

"Come along, quickly now," the medic urged. "Our sergeant has a plan. This way!"

This way was apparently down a narrowing funnel of earthbent stone that eventually took a sharp twist right to curl around a hastily- raised hill. Huojin raced to catch up with Moriaki, trying to fit the walls and blasts of flame he heard behind them into some kind of coherent strategy. "This is a plan?"

"It is, if the legends hold true," Moriaki called back. "Are you familiar with tales of the drowned, Guard Huojin?"

"Are you *kidding*?" If he'd come face to face with a mirror, Huojin thought he would have smacked the crazy man first and asked questions later. Anyone that terrified wasn't going to listen to reason.

"Water just kills you! It doesn't - I've never - this is *crazy*!"

"Not madness, my boy. Malevolence incarnate," Moriaki said gravely. "But our straits are not quite so desperate as you might imagine."

Dead men walking - well, lurching - and it wasn't desperate? "Are you *insane*?"

"I very much hope not!" Moriaki waved his free hand, hurrying the fainter-hearted along. "My father dealt with a drowned when I was a young lad. Dangerous, yes; if they catch us, they will kill us, and their curse will take our bodies as well. But they are *not* ghosts. Quite simply, Huojin - perilous as they may be to the unprepared, they are not *intelligent*."

Huojin glanced back at the closing slurps of wet flesh, and shuddered. "Smart enough to come after us!"

"Not *us*, young man. The flame of life." Moriaki chivvied slower runners up and around the twist like a koala-sheepdog, eyes narrowed as if he were counting seconds in his head. "The force which moves them is utterly cold; it would drink the world's lives to be warm again. And so, our bait."

Huojin nearly tripped. "*We're* the bait?"

Saving his breath, Moriaki didn't answer.

And I thought it was just Lee who was crazy - what the heck?

Ice was sliding uphill past them, gleaming white and blue. Another few frantic strides, and he could see General Iroh, Sergeant Kyo, and others guarding Amaya behind a stone wall, as she drew frozen lumps from the harbor's depths.

"Ah!" Moriaki grinned toothily. "Excellent idea!"

Excellent? The only thing even remotely related to excellent was getting *away* from the shambling bodies rounding the ice-laced curve-

"Now!" Iroh ordered.

Fists punched, and ice erupted in flames.

I'm running out of time.

Zuko paused on a piece of misty shore that looked just like every *other* blasted piece of shore. Except this one definitely didn't have Langxue and Shirong on it. Or Koh, which was the only good thing about this mess. "How do I find a spirit that doesn't want to be found?"

"*You don't.*"

The dark ocean shimmered under the mist, his reflection shifting into something neither dragon nor woman. "*Foolish child. How dare you trespass on my realm?*"

"Your realm?" Zuko dared. "Thank you, Great-Grandmother. I must be getting close."

"*Impudent cub! Asagitatsu will never accept one tainted with Shidan's blood!*"

"Azulon must have set your blood boiling, matching up Father with Mother," Zuko said wryly. *Azula. Think Azula. Get her mad.* "What did you think, because he was the second child he wasn't important enough to worry about?"

"*You dare-*"

"And why shouldn't Azulon have approved the match? Asagitatsu and Byakko were allies, once." Zuko scanned the fogs, looking for thin spots. He had to be close. She'd never be this furious if he wasn't. "When did that change? When did *you* change it?"

"*I will destroy you!*"

"Maybe," Zuko acknowledged. "But not here. Not now." He stepped closer to the water, glaring down the twisting reflection. "You are ancient, Great-Grandmother. Powerful. And you hunt those you think have wronged you to the ends of the earth. For that, you have Grandfather's respect, and mine. But you are still our enemy... and still a dragon, bound to the living world." He shrugged. "So go ahead and threaten us. I hope it makes you feel better."

Water stilled. "*Dragon, yes. Bound to the living world, yes. I cannot touch you here... without aid.*"

Ice seemed to clutch his heart, as the reflection stretched up and out-

"*Aid, I have.*" The blue dragon coiled in the air, jaws gaping. "*Time to die.*"

...I am so, so stupid.

Flames covered the world.

Saoluan was trembling in place, like a komodo-rhino scenting battle. "We have to get down there!"

"No." Teruko took a deep breath, feigning calm with practiced skill. Usually it was easy, even when enemy ships were trying to ram them. Staring at the unearthly horde lurching from the surf after the civilians? Not so easy. "We have to stay right here."

"People are dying! *Your* people!" The Kyoshi Warrior cast her an accusing glance, made all the angrier by the facepaint. "Don't you even care?"

"*Yes.*"

Saoluan took a step back. On solid rock, fortunately.

"People are going to die down there," Teruko said grimly. "But in case you forgot, our prince, and your little brother, *and* Agent Shirong, who's a decent guy for someone with rocks in his head - they're *stuck* here. Until and unless they pull off a miracle, and talk a volcano into listening to us. If they can't, if *something* comes up here to stop them, and they fail - this volcano is going to blow. And then everybody *down to Ba Sing Se* could die."

"So we're just going to stand here." Saoluan's fists clenched. "That's horrible."

"Yeah," Teruko said quietly. "Welcome to the war." She narrowed her eyes, peering at suspicious ripples in the brush. Flexed her fingers in anticipation. "And cheer up. Looks like the monsters are coming to us."

I wish Uncle had talked a lot more about dragon-slaying.

A fleeting thought, in the midst of *duck* and *roll* and *twist the water, now!*

Makoto's azure breath shattered chilled waves into salty steam, thickening the fog. Her wings beat

down, a gale nearly blasting him from his feet, as she circled for another fiery pass.

Agni, she's huge!

That was the only thing saving him. Her head alone was large enough to snap him up in one bite; her claws swords, that would pierce him through. But her wings and body were sized to match, and not even the most skilled bender could ignore mass.

A sparrowkeet can turn on a copper coin. She can't.

Land and fight, or strafe him to death. Those were her only options-

Makoto blew out a subtler breath, and gestured with both claws. Flame coiled in on itself, and sprang.

Oh, that's just not fair.

Zuko slapped his hands together to part the flames, teeth sinking into his lip as blue fire fought like a live thing. This wasn't like Azula's fire, unstoppable force meant to crush her opponents to ashes. This moved, breathed, *hungered*; it sought fuel, ever more fuel, and he was all there was to burn-

The faintest whiff of sulfur.

Will braced, Zuko rolled into the flame.

Makoto's fangs slammed into sand inches away. The dragon spat out half-melted glass, whirled-

Not fast enough!

Throbbing fingers grabbed the midnight-blue mane, let the fling of her head yank him off the ground. Zuko crouched in midair, twisting with and against the whiplash force-

Slammed into blue scales, and clung, face buried in her mane.

"Fool! My flames will sear you wherever you lie-"

"No," Zuko gritted out, twitching as fire gnawed through clothes to skin. "They *won't*. I knew Grandfather. I know Father. I know Azula. So I know *you*." He spat out blood, forced himself to think past the pain. "You hate, and you torture, and there's *nothing* else real in the world but what *you* want." He gasped at the searing heat; breathed in, and snarled. "If I die right here, *you won't get to watch*."

The roar of fury shook him, body and mind. Zuko clung tighter, focusing on how hard scales dented his cheek, how mane-strands tried to cut his fingers, how the spikes of Makoto's neck pressed against chest and gripping legs. Anything, besides the fiery agony clinging to him in turn-

Wind gusted, and gravity yanked upward, lurching in his stomach.

Wingover. She's diving!

"The sea is still," Makoto sneered, wings clamped tight as she fell. *"It may be but an instant, but I will see you die."* A flutter of dark laughter. *"A pity. And I had thought your sister his true heir..."*

Her grief tore through him, keening to the marrow of his bones. Her Sozin; her dark, murderous love who knew how much she hated. Who was willing to burn the world for her, starting with those lying *beasts* that had weakened her clan so much they had to die. Who had been stolen from

her too soon, far too soon; the Avatar's curse claiming the soul that should have ravaged the world at her side millennia longer-

True grief. True rage. Enough to make any soul want to die.

...Azula always lies.

Shut away feeling. Shut away the fear of the ocean falling toward them; it could only kill him if he let it. So he wouldn't.

The sea was Makoto's attack. Block it.

Carefully not thinking, he let go.

Beauty Looks at Mirror.

Foaming waves surged; froze. Makoto's wings beat hard, trying to pull up-

Dragon's Chi Spreads Across River.

Ice softened and rose, sliding under Zuko as he skidded down the wave face; ice to slush to water to shore, oh this was going to *hurt*-

He tumbled as Makoto crashed, ice splintering like a pack of glaciers grinding together. Seas roared; the dragon *screeched*...

Silence. Utter, ear-ringing silence.

...I think I won.

Makoto had come from the sea through his reflection. She'd returned to it through his Mirror. The symmetry alone ought to bar her from the spirit world's boundary. For now.

Ow ow ow still on fire-

He yanked the shreds of the Blue Spirit's shirt off, remembering too well how this flame had fought him. Better to get it off first, and crush it at leisure...

Huddled in a nest of charred cloth, blue fire cringed.

Zuko's breath caught. No, he had to be crazy. But on the fringes of the spirit world, who knew?
"Are you... alive?"

Flames seemed to uncurl a little. Wavered at him.

"You are." Carefully, Zuko picked up the cloth; damp sand might have quenched it where his own will would not. "What do I do with you?"

Home?

It was a whisper in his blood; hopeful, but wincing like a frightened child.

Home? Please?

"Living flame," Zuko breathed, heart beating fast. "Fire under Makoto's control... where's home? I'll take you, I promise. As far as I can."

Come!

Endless agony, his back and shoulders on fire, a thin trickle of his life feeding the fire cradled in his palm. Yet it only seemed to be a few steps, before mist rolled back-

A mountain of bright, *asagi*-blue scales, faint slumbering breaths rippling the water about her. Pale, *mizuasagi* green sheathed the softer under-jaw and throat; true *shinsu* red streamed in her damp mane.

It's her.

Across the water. In the spirit world. *Damn* it.

Home! Flames crackled, pleading. *Home, home, home!*

Zuko swallowed. Looked at the shore, and the water, and the volcano-spirit that couldn't be in any natural sleep. "I promised."

Think. How can I do this without killing myself?

Zuko eyed the distance. Checked what was left of his equipment. Knife, dao, pants, boots. If he'd just had his firepot!

Langxue, you and I are going to talk about this place. And how you show up equipped for it. Later.

Crossing the water would mean crossing into the spirit world. He was fairly sure if he did that, he'd be dead. With no sort-of-helpful Moon spirit around to drown him back to life, and no healing bender currently *there* in the living world. Langxue and Shirong were *busy*.

This, was a bad plan.

If he'd had a firepot, he could have just tossed the flame over...

Well, I don't, Zuko told himself fiercely, toes scuffing sand in frustration. *So think about what I do have-*

Sand. Black, volcanic; glittering like the fiery stone it had once been.

I don't have Toph to help. But I've got to try.

Crouching down, Zuko scooped up a gritty lump, and breathed fire into it. *It doesn't have to be perfect. It just has to hold together a few minutes.*

Ice would have been so, so much easier. But bending didn't work in the spirit world. Meaning a bowl of ice would melt halfway across that pitiless sea, and then where would his flame be?

Another breath, and he kneaded sand like wet sugar, trying not to think about how only will and bending kept molten glass from his skin. *Need it round enough to throw, big enough to hold some fuel...*

It drained him, like holding a fireball steady. By the time he'd shaped a bumpy, sort-of-sandstone hollow, the world was tilting around him.

Home?

"Just a little longer." Zuko tucked shirt remnants and blue flame into the rocky hollow, swept into a

low stance that ended palms-out to deflect-

Ice froze in a slim footpath from the sand, just above the water's surface. The path grew farther into the mist, farther-

Clamped onto his chi like a lamprey, sucking, *hungry*...

Zuko dropped out of stance, deliberately punching a fist into black sand. "Hah!"

It was like tearing the sucker-fish from his own flesh. It *hurt*. But the frightening drain stopped.

"Water is Fire's opposite," Zuko croaked; one of Uncle's old lessons. "But if you want to *stop* water... use Earth." He coughed, getting his breathing under control. "Okay. Stop *before* the ice ends."

Spray-wet ice, a storm-slick metal deck; there wasn't much difference. Zuko walked the ice-path with careful skill; not rushing, not lingering. Technically the ice was still connected to the shore, so he wasn't *crossing* the water.

But if a spirit shows up, I don't want to count on technicalities- Oh boy.

End of the road. Dark water lapped at pale ice, turning it translucent and fragile.

"Far as I can go," Zuko said firmly. Back up a step to firmer ice, gripped the lumpy bowl, and sighted on his target. *Right... there!*

A half-spin, and he threw.

Crack. Craaack...

Time to go. Either the fire would make it or it wouldn't-

Scrambling back to shore, Zuko had to glance toward the plummeting bowl and its shrieking trail of azure flames. Fused sand arced down, struck-

Dead on the nose.

Shattered.

There are some things even the darkest spirit magic can't hold someone comatose through. The tender snout twitched, inhaled flame-

Zuko didn't hear the roar as much as *feel* it; an overpressure that flattened the world, shattered ice-

Oh, damn.

He went down, into the dark. Cold, so cold... he tried to hold his breath, but the air was slipping...

I'm dying.

What do they say, third time's the charm?

Uncle. Grandfather. Sorry...

Pressure. Not the squeeze of hungry water. Something long and sharp, like a fistful of swords.

Coughing. *Freezing*. And the odd sword-cage that gripped him was... warm?

Massive gold eyes blinked at him. A tender nose snorted flickers of blue flame. *:Cub?:*

Like Shidan. Like Ryuuko-hime. Images, not words.

Shivering, Zuko reached back. *:My people, wounded. Sheltering caldera. Danger to come. My people, against the darkness-that-steals-souls...:*

Too much water. Too much cold. He couldn't...

Darkness.

And oddly, the flick of a warm tongue.

Saoluan slashed and kicked at the half-dozen bodies in front of her, fan-shield smashing the closest away, stomping yet another severed hand underfoot before it could drag her down. Who'd have thought proper sword-training could backfire so spectacularly? Cut off somebody's hand, they usually weren't a problem anymore.

But the drowned didn't bleed. Didn't flinch. Didn't *stop*, bits and pieces still wriggling toward her, and the unconscious benders beyond. "There's too many of them!"

"It's not outnumbered," Teruko panted, a lash of flame knocking wet corpses from the ledge to tumble and squelch down. "It's a target-rich environment!"

I'll give you target-rich, you walking sparkler-

Clammy cold seized her calf, and Saoluan stumbled. *No!*

She lashed out even as they dragged her down, a scarf-cut that opened one from shoulder to hip. It flopped, putrescent masses oozing, but bore her down into waiting fingers.

Cold...

Flesh like wet ice sucked the life from her; just as so many of her sister warriors had had their lives sucked away years ago, withering into dying crones.

Let me die. I should have died.

But... there weren't *enough* hands trying to tear her apart. Not enough-

Langxue!

Fear and rage fought the drowning darkness. "Teruko!"

"Agni!" Fire exploded, sizzling in waterlogged flesh-

Earth shook.

Terror clutched Saoluan's gut, worse than even the shredding hands. Monsters were monsters, but earth was *stable*. Unmoving. Eternal-

Shaking like a bowl of seaweed gel, lurching bodies flung about like children's jacks. She felt the vibration in the stone under her, like struck crystal, like singing...

The cone *roared*.

Aching, Saoluan twisted her head in the death-chill grip, eyes wide as smoke and flame and *other* rose into the sky. *A dragon. It's a dragon...*

Misty wings beat, a warm wind of summer and flame. Asagitatsu danced in midair, exulting in free flight. Swooped, rolled, turned-

Saw them. Inhaled.

Better fried than sucked dry. "Do it," Saoluan breathed.

Fire swept down like a wave. Saoluan flinched, waiting for agony-

The weight on her... crumbled away.

The warrior blinked through ashes, staring as flames washed across her skin; red and green dancing in bright blue, all warm as sunlight. To *living* flesh.

The drowned burned, white flames dissolving even armor into pale ash.

:*Breathe.*:

An order. Spots still flickering in her vision, Saoluan didn't even try to disobey. Fire slid down her throat, *burned*-

:*Mine.*:

Somehow she was still breathing, dizzy and tired and weirdly hot, like she'd baked herself in noon sun. But alive. "Langxue!"

"Ow..."

Saoluan gave him a pat-down check as he sat up, squinting against the wind as misty wings soared down into the settlement. "Are you okay? What happened?" And was it panic playing tricks on her, or was that white streak of hair just a bit wider?

"We won," Langxue said thickly. "I think." Held his head in his hands. "Spirits. I forgot how much that *hurts*."

"Note to self." Curled on himself, Shirong wasn't even trying to move. "Taunting massive face-stealing centipede spirits is *not* a good idea."

"Worked, though." Langxue pressed the heels of his hands against his forehead, wincing. "Gave Zuko time to... oh, no."

Teruko had her ear to the prince's chest, face grim. Tipped his head back, pressed her lips to his, and breathed *out*-

A gurgling cough, and Zuko turned on his side, gasping out water.

Only training let Saoluan keep her grip on her sword. The green robe had charred away from the firebender's back, leaving long streaks of weeping blisters. "What the hell happened to you?"

Langxue's reaction involved more colorful language; Saoluan grinned sheepishly as she recognized her own drunken curses. "I told you to stay *out* of the water!" Langxue finished.

Still coughing, Zuko flicked him the finger.

"If you can move, sir," Teruko offered a hand, "you need to see this."

"Oh hell. The refugees-" Saoluan started to slip off the ledge.

Langxue caught her wrist. "I think someone's handling it."

White flames gouted and died across the caldera below, fanned by wings of smoke and summer wind. Asagitatsu circled her domain once more, red-maned head searching for any last trace of undead flesh...

Soared upward, satisfied, gliding back down to mantle her wings over the cone. Gold-smoke eyes stared across the distance to them, hot as the sun.

:You may try.:

"You may try," Iroh murmured, watching over Amaya and his battered nephew. "Not the most warm of welcomes."

"Laying the restless dead to peace in pillars of flame? That was warm enough for me." Amaya moved water-gloved hands over Zuko's burned back, smoothing away redness into whole skin. "We wanted a chance. Sometimes the spirits give us exactly what we ask for."

"Hmm." Iroh nodded. "How are the burns?"

"He'll be sore a few days," Amaya said practically. "They're not what I'm worried about." She moved her hands a bit lower, feeling along Zuko's shoulderblades. "He needs to rest, Iroh. If someone has to sit on him to make him. *Light duty*, I think your marines call it. No heavy lifting, no extensive bending. If it's possible, I want him sleeping in the sun whenever he can."

Iroh frowned. "Surely the burns are not that bad."

"I told you, it's not the burns. This is the second time he's *drowned*." Amaya pressed her ear to skin, listening to sleeping breaths. Lifted it again. "I'm worried about his lungs. You firebenders need your breath."

Troubling thought. "But he will be well."

"If he rests." Letting water flow back into a bowl, Amaya sat back from her slumbering patient. "I wonder how he convinced Asagitatsu."

"I am certain he will tell us. Later." Iroh felt in his sleeve, unaccustomed to feeling this shy.

"Perhaps this is not the best time. But if the promise of today holds true, we will remain in danger for some time to come. So there will not be a better time." He let carved wood fall into his palm, gold chain bundled against it; feeling every delicate curve he'd seared into the rubywood disk over the past week. "Lady Amaya. Will you honor an old man with an honest answer?"

"I would always give you an honest answer, Iroh..." She saw what he held, and stopped, startled. "Oh."

Don't laugh, Iroh thought ruefully. *I can live with any answer but laughter.*

Slowly, she smiled. Reached into her medicine kit, and pulled out familiar red cord. "Did you know Saoluan has very good taste in wine? And a generous heart when it comes to trading for her little brother."

Dead bodies and mayhem be damned. It was a *magnificent* day. "Is that a yes, my lady?" Iroh dared.

"You old scoundrel." Blue eyes danced. "Who else am I going to find willing to stand with me no matter what goes wrong? Of course it's a yes!"

Grinning, Iroh embraced her. Ah, it had been too long.

Somewhere in the middle of tender touches, there was a sneeze.

Nibbling an ear, Iroh hesitated. Glanced over Amaya's shoulder, as she shook with silent laughter.

Ah. One aggravated, pale gold glare. "Nephew. We were just-"

"Chasing butterflies?" Zuko coughed, still grumpy as a winter-woken platypus-bear. "Counting robe threads? Practicing breath control?"

Amaya chuckled. "Is that what you call it?"

"Ask Private Rikiya. When he's being polite." The glare faded, into something just... tired. "Is everybody okay? If you're... busy... everybody's probably okay..."

"Everyone's been seen to," Amaya reassured him. "You're the worst still to heal."

Of those who will heal at all, Iroh thought soberly. "Our people have matters well in hand. Asagitatsu's fires are restored, and we have her permission to live here. Langxue states that the Face-Stealer has no more power to strike us now, and will not be able to gather more for some time. Though to seal out malign power more securely, we still need a name."

"Dragons' Wings," Zuko muttered, eyes sliding shut. "She called me *cub*... and that's what we are. Shelter, for those who need it." He winced, and shook his head slowly.

"Zuko?" Amaya asked.

"Go 'head with what you're doing," Zuko mumbled. "Just..." He swallowed. "I'm tired."

"Then rest, nephew." Iroh pulled the sheet up around him, and laid a hand on wild black hair. "Every man needs his rest."

Sighing quietly, he let Amaya guide him out.

"He's upset," the waterbender murmured.

"Not with us," Iroh said confidently. "He only misses his mother. And what he wished to have with his father, had my brother not been such a blind fool."

"He's upset," Amaya repeated, giving him a serious look. "It's common when a widowed parent marries again. You've done your grieving for Natsu. Now he has to grieve her memory." She waved a stern finger. "Take it seriously, my friend. It hurts children to let that go. He's a young warrior, and we shouldn't let him be selfish - but a little grief is his right."

Hmm. They'd see about that. "Only a friend?" Iroh teased.

"Find somewhere a little more private, and we'll see how friendly you can be," Amaya winked.

"Ah. As my lady wishes." Offering his arm, Iroh grinned. *A magnificent day, indeed.*

Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ghostly cackling woke Piandao in the darkness.

The fact that I don't even flinch anymore is probably a bad sign, the swordsman reflected, listening for any other sound out of place in the quiet of his bedroom. Nightingale floors would raise the alarm for most intruders, their silencing wedges removed for the night to sing under careless footsteps. But an airbender might step lightly enough to evade even those. "Old friend?" Just in case it *wasn't* Temul.

The familiar ghost faded out of the night, a subtle blue glow lighting her smirk. "Asagitatsu has woken."

She might as well have poured ice water down his spine. "How bad is it? Agni, we're going to need all the waterbending healers we can plead for to treat survivors, and Pakku's down south. Talking to the Northern Water Tribe's going to be murder-"

Temul held up a patient hand. "I didn't say she'd *erupted*."

Piandao squinted at her. Took a moment to rub sleep-sand from his eyes. "What's happened?"

"Makoto leaned on stolen fire too often." Temul grinned. "The young prince stole it back." A corner of her lips curled up, showing teeth. "Let the Avatar tremble. Asagitatsu has a Thief once more."

"Kuzon wouldn't want that," Piandao argued, gathering covers around himself against the ghost's chill. *One more day. Just one more, and they'll be gone and safe.*

Temul was his ally, and always had been. But that didn't make him blind. She'd been quiet, all these days he'd trained Sokka. Too quiet.

Kyoshi, and then Roku, and now Aang. Three Avatars who haven't listened.

The Avatar Spirit versus a Fire Nation ghost. It shouldn't even be funny. The spirit of the whole world was more than a match for one human soul...

But she isn't just a human soul, is she? Piandao admitted to himself. *She was a dragon-child. And Agni loves her.*

"He wouldn't, would he?" Temul said lightly. "Who do you think young Zuko is?"

She'd hinted that before. It still shook him to hear it said. "He doesn't remember-"

"He does." Temul's tone was steel. "He is Agni's knife. He knows who he is. Who he *was*. And why Agni offered him the choice."

It's worse than I thought. That letter to Katara, with all its carefully-crafted viciousness - and Zuko knew? "Kuzon spent his life searching for the Avatar-"

"He spent his life searching for *Aang*," Temul cut him off. "For an airbender only a few years younger than he was. To the last, he thought his friend alive - and *awake*. Suffering with us the

tides of war. *Learning*. Not just of bending, but of human kindness, and malice, and the desperation of survival. And what have we, in Avatar Aang? Not a bender of Kuzon's years, who knows even the best of us fail. A twelve-year-old *child*, who can no more understand an Agni Kai than I can fly!"

Her fury was a cold wind through his hair, driving snow in the midst of summer. Piandao faced it as he would a blade. "That's not Aang's fault."

"Oh? And has he been blind and deaf since he woke to our world once more?" Temul's eyes narrowed, as she stalked nearer. "Face that letter, Piandao. He knew she was the Avatar's teacher, and still he strove to tear them apart. Rage *drips* from those pages, old friend. And it is no spoiled princeling's spite. You know better."

He did.

That was what frightened him.

Parry, duck, stab- yeep!

Yeah. That one was going to leave a mark. Even if Piandao had only slapped him with the flat of the blade.

A few days ago Sokka might have rubbed the bruise, maybe with an exaggerated yelp if he were up against somebody like Ty Lee - who didn't *really* want to hurt people, just to get them out of Azula's way. Now, with his teacher? He just backed off a bit, lowering his blade. "What's wrong?"

"Reading your opponent. A valuable skill." Piandao sighed, and sheathed his sword. "How have you been doing with the poetry?"

Okay, that hurt more than the bruise. "You guys have the *weirdest* characters *ever*."

"Not characters. *Akshara*." Piandao smiled, amused. "You realize the Painted Lady's message was a test. I can help you gain the tools to pass it - every swordsman should be a *jitakshara* - but I doubt the spirits would take it well, if I directly interfered." His smile turned sober. "As you may be interfering."

"Aang, sitting down with a book? Not gonna happen," Sokka said ruefully. "And he's one kid, supposed to fix the whole world? That's not right." He gave Piandao a determined glare. "She wrote that stuff on the beach in front of all of us. If she just wanted Aang stuck with it, she could have done something else."

"True enough," Piandao allowed.

"Besides," Sokka grinned, "anything where you can say *her-hands-busily-picking-flowers* all as one word - that's kind of neat." He scrunched his face up, thinking. "So you're worried about spirits? I thought Temul was being too nice."

Piandao straightened, alert. "You've seen her."

"Not much," Sokka admitted. "She comes at night, and I've been sleeping. Toph says she walks them around the valley and points out things. Different kinds of rock. How water can hide in weird places; I never would have thought a *plant* could drown bugs and eat them..." He eyed his teacher. "This is bad? She's stayed away from Aang. We made sure of that."

Piandao frowned. "I don't suppose you know the story of the lion-dog who didn't growl?"

"No. But I think I can guess." Sokka grimaced. "So she's up to something. Like what?"

"If I knew, I might worry less." Dark gray brows drew down, thoughtful. "Where *exactly* has she taken you?"

"Okay!" Toph felt the feather-light shift of ground that was Aang pumping a fist in the air. "We're going to show once and for all there's nothing wrong with Appa walking on the ground."

Oh, this is gonna be good. Leaning back against a warm rock, Toph let grass tickle her feet, trying to see if she could wriggle her toes in time with Katara's breathing. Someone had had ostrich-horses fenced in here not too long ago; she could feel how they'd scratched up the earth to get at bugs, and lightly trampled some areas in clusters of nesting bodies. Right now, though, it was a hiding place for one grumbling sky bison who liked the grass, but not the tubers Piandao's farmers had offered along with bales of hay.

Given she didn't have much to do besides try to train Aang and laze in the sun, Toph had started counting bales of hay. Old habit; maybe she was blind, and tiny, and her parents had wanted to keep her away from the whole world - but she was still a merchant's daughter. Counting was like Sokka checking over Boomerang, or Katara tallying up the food. It was what you did, to make sure your world was in order.

Counting bales of hay - well, she didn't like the numbers. At all.

Maybe I'm remembering the counts wrong.

She hoped so. 'Cause if she wasn't... her dad had part ownership in at least a dozen farms. He always tallied up what they needed to spend for the winter. And Appa had eaten his way through enough bales to keep a small herd of cow-pigs for a week. If Temul had been telling the truth about bison dropping out of the sky, and Sokka thought she *was* - hoo boy.

Tao said the Earth Kingdom just looked away. Let the massacre happen.

He thought it was because of Chin the Conqueror. Toph wasn't so sure. Chin had been a long, *long* way back.

Earth keeps grudges, all right. But everybody keeping a grudge that long? When people they know are gonna die right in front of 'em? I don't think so.

If Tao had asked her, Toph would have put her money on a lot of ticked-off farmers. Who'd decided once and for all they weren't going to have their crops eaten anymore. After all, everybody said the Fire Nation had killed the *Air Nomads*.

So what happened to the bison? They could fly. Some of 'em must have got away and run wild. Why aren't they out there?

Because they weren't. Unless they were hiding better than a badger-mole under a mountain-

Aang windmilled his arms, breaking her train of thought. "And now the amazing Appa will walk across this ordinary piece of ground!"

Feeding Momo some of her berries, Katara chuckled. "He's already walked all over here, Aang."

"Even better! Come on, buddy."

A shaggy rumble, and tons of sky bison tiptoed across the grass.

"There!" Aang said, satisfied. "And now-" He jumped.

Prepared, Toph was braced like a rock when his feet struck the earth, rippling dirt and grass and rocks like wind through her hair.

Katara yelped, bowl almost jarred out of her hands as her seat shifted. Momo pounced on spilled berries. "Aang!"

"Sorry, Katara. But see? Everything's fine!"

Everything was *flat*, sure. Like a pancake. But just like a pancake, open up the skin, and inside things were a lot different.

Familiar footsteps heading their way. Good; at least two people ought to get what she was about to do.

Toph dug her fingers into the earth, pulling it up to settle like a favorite blanket.

"It's... Toph!"

She didn't know what it looked like, but she knew what it felt like. All the pressure that had been put on the earth fluffed up in reverse, Appa's paw-prints round as dumplings. "That's what's left in the dirt, guys."

Silence. She felt Katara's shift of unease, Aang's heart beating faster. "But... but... Kuzon never said anything!"

"Kuzon wasn't an earthbender." Sokka walked around the pawprints, head tilted like he was looking them over. "Wow. Appa did that?"

"Well, what's he supposed to do?" Aang faced the surer footsteps, muscles tense. " *Not* walk on the ground? We did it all the time when we saw Kuzon!"

"Which leads me to wonder where, exactly, you saw Kuzon." Piandao rubbed his chin. "From what I know of Byakko, they're as careful with their terraces as we are with pasture. The only place that wouldn't suffer would be the lava fields."

From the way Aang's toes stiffened, Toph knew he'd hit home.

"Temul hates sky bison," Katara pointed out. "You *know* she's exaggerating."

The swordsman crouched to run his fingers through the grass. "True. One sky bison won't crush the earth here forever. Ten? Fifty? That would be a problem." He straightened. "Aang. One thing you need to think more about is *time*. Alive and dead, Temul has seen this land through over three centuries. One wave washes ashore, and nothing seems to change. Watch those waves over a decade and more? Entire islands can vanish."

"Then you should have told us!" Aang stepped forward, vibrating in place. "And you should have kept talking until we listened!"

"Eyes or ears," came a familiar, weightless voice, "your people *don't* listen."

Temul. Toph shot to her feet, trying not to sweat. She couldn't feel the ghost's weight, couldn't hear breathing, couldn't sense *anything*. Except the odd certainty that Temul was right in front of Aang, scowling dark as a silent room.

"You don't know that," Aang shot back. "You hate airbenders. You don't know anything about how we live!"

"But I know how you die." The ghost's chuckle made Toph shiver. "Shall I show you the last to die here? I think you'll find what they were doing... interesting."

In blazing summer, Toph's teeth chattered. So *cold*...

Center, Aang repeated Tao's lessons in his head. *Be like a whirlwind - let the vision whip through, but keep touching the earth. Don't let the vision pull you all the way in; a bridge has to stay on both sides.*

He could still see the pasture, though grass had faded like fog. But he could also see somewhere else. *Feel* somewhere else; the jolting footfalls as Temul ran through the storm, the way gravity frayed as the ghost leapt up to rain-soaked rooftops. The silent curses as she damned now-dead Fire Sages and onmitsu shamans to a watery grave; they'd bound her by her own family scrolls, stolen at moon's dark...

Onmitsu, Aang thought. *Assassins? Like Shih?* And how could you assassinate a ghost-

Lightning flashed, and he saw what she'd seen. Knew what she'd known.

No! No, no, it can't be, it can't-

Ranks of assassins. Waiting to kill Kuzon. Watching, as Kuzon killed as many as he could of *them*, because those were their Elders' orders. Because they needed the secret Kuzon kept from them with his life... and because every onmitsu who fell was already avenged. Because-

No no stop it this can't be real!

-Kuzon had already *let* them close enough to kill him. She could see that by the fire not flashing with every blow, the blood bubbling with each breath-

Stop it stop it you're lying-!

-Because Kuzon *knew* them, as she knew them. Better; she'd only seen their parents and grandparents a handful of days on shipboard, and never seen these children in life-

No, Air Nomads don't do-

"...Ja Aku..."

He knew the name, that split second before Temul called down lightning as Agni's own deadly wrath. *He* knew it, not Temul, remembering the worst day of his life a century ago, and a smile that wasn't a smile at all.

"That's the only way it's fair."

His memory. Not Temul's. And it hurt - but any hurt was better than looking through the eyes of the ghost who'd killed his people, who watched Kuzon die even now with less grief than pure, unrelenting *rage*-

"*Stop it!*"

Daylight. Grass. Appa behind him; Katara's arm around his shoulders, as they all shook.

A few feet away, Sokka was almost pale. "Kuzon was killed by *airbenders*?"

"He was killed by onmitsu of Air Nomad descent. I doubt more than one or two were trained airbenders. It's the Fire Lord's most dearly kept secret." Piandao stood between them and the storm-shadowed ghost, blade drawn. "Enough. You'll break the boy."

"Then let him *break*." Pale gold eyes flickered with lightning. "I will have my revenge. On the Fire Lord. On the Avatar. Our deaths are on them *both!*" Blue fire blazed about her hands-

Shattered like ice, against a shield of upraised earth.

Toph?

"Not going to let you do this." The little earthbender stepped to Piandao's side, bare feet precise as the swordsman's blade. "I get you need revenge. I believe you. But you say you're gonna hurt Aang for *Kuzon*? No way!" Her arms were raised, ready to snap into fists or a block. "You didn't ask him!"

"Toph?" Katara had her waterskin uncapped, ready to spin icy shields or stabbing icicles around them both. "What are you doing?"

Toph didn't even twitch an ear their way. "Kuzon's got a right to his own revenge." Sightless eyes fixed on Temul. "You don't get to take it *for* him."

"Clever girl." A whisper, like the down-draft before a storm. "But you have no idea. He is here. He is my *enemy*. I *must*."

"Enough already!" Toph batted words aside like mosquitoes. "You showed him - you showed *us* - we believe you, okay? Kuzon... he never... he *tried*, and..." She swallowed, and shook her head, wordless.

Eyes narrowed, Katara stepped in. "You can't go after Aang when Kuzon chose to die."

Sokka winced. "Katara..."

"He could have lied!" The waterbender glared at Temul, mist or no mist. "He could have told them what they wanted to hear, and lived to help Aang! But no, he's a firebender, a *lord*, and he had to die because of your stupid, *stupid* honor-"

"Katara," Aang croaked. Not wanting to say anything. It hurt so, so much. "He... couldn't have lied to them."

She froze. Turned toward him, in dawning disbelief.

"They were... they were trained by somebody I knew, back at the temple," Aang managed. "They would have known. Anything he said... they would have *heard* a lie." *Airbenders trained killers. Airbenders trained murderers. Kuzon died because - because-*

He didn't want to think about it. He didn't want to know what he knew. Didn't want it to be real, ever.

But Kuzon had never, *ever* met Ja Aku. Not before he'd run away. If Temul knew his name now...

It can't be real. But it is.

He didn't know what else Temul wanted to do to him. He didn't care. Nothing could hurt worse than this.

"Aang?" Katara had water wrapped around her hand, ready to heal. "Don't let her beat you. You didn't do this. You didn't do *any* of this." She glared at the ghost. "And everybody who did is dead. You've *had* your revenge."

"A bold lie, from one who would see my nation drowned for one woman's murder." Temul's gaze was implacable as lava. "You'd have us all pay for one man's evil." She pointed a long, bony finger. "And who will pay for his? Would you offer *your* life, little waterbender?"

Aang gulped. Because of *course* Katara would. She was perfect, she was kind, she was just *good*...

She... wasn't saying anything.

Sokka stepped forward. "I would."

"*Sokka!*" Aang wasn't sure which of them yelled it first.

"You're playing with fire, son," Piandao said quietly, gray eyes dark with worry.

"No. I'm offering a *temporary alliance* to Kuzon's friend," Sokka said grimly. "Because Kuzon was Aang's friend, and Aang's *my* friend. And I trust Aang." He gave Temul back glare for baleful glare. "You don't want to hurt Aang. You want to hurt *the Avatar*. Well, guess what? Unless Aang gets all glowy, the Avatar Spirit *isn't here*. All your revenge would do is hurt a kid who never did *anything* to you." He took a breath. "You were Kuzon's friend. If you can torture somebody and call it revenge - then none of us knew him."

Don't do it! Aang wanted to yell. Because if Temul *had* been Kuzon's friend...

Then I didn't know him, Aang realized, throat closed with fear and... he didn't know what. But it *hurt*. There hadn't been anything left of his firebender friend in that old man killing - dying - in the dark. Killing *airbenders*. Being killed *by* airbenders.

I don't know anyone anymore.

He should have yelled it. But he couldn't. Temul was a ghost, not a spirit; and he could push Boots but he couldn't push *her*, even when he wanted to - and if *every* Fire Nation ghost was this scary he couldn't blame Kyoshi for wanting them chained down, he just *couldn't*. How could the Avatar balance the world if just a *ghost* could stand in his way?

"You have faith in your friend," Temul mused. "A warning, young man. Faith where there is no loyalty is clasping the scorpion-viper to your bosom. So long as it is chilled, it will need you. But when it warms..."

Sokka didn't flinch. "That's *my* problem."

Aang choked. Twice. Temul had called him a - and Sokka was *agreeing* with her? There was no way he was going to sit still for-

Toph stepped on his foot.

Temul's gaze flicked his way as Aang yelped, and the storm about her seemed to thin. "You are

brave. But you do not understand revenge." Ghostly fingers tipped Sokka's chin up. "You will."

Thunder cracked, and the ghost was gone.

Sokka folded like dropped laundry.

"Sokka!" Katara dashed around Aang, water-wrapped hands feeling over her brother as Piandao held him on his lap. "What did she do to him?"

"I don't know." Piandao touched fingers to the side of Sokka's neck. "His pulse is steady. His chi's ringing like a struck bell. But I don't think he's injured."

"How would you know? You're not a healer!"

"I've been on more battlefields than you've seen summers, young lady. I do know something of who will live and who will die," Piandao said dryly. "He made Temul an offer. I think she took it."

Toph cracked her knuckles, and started heading back to the mansion.

"Where are you going?" Aang blurted out.

"Packing," she tossed back over her shoulder.

"What? Sokka's hurt!"

For a moment, she stopped. "If Katara can fix him, she will. If Master Piandao can fix him, *he* will. Sokka's gonna wake up. Or he *won't*." She swallowed. "Any way you slice it, we've got to leave. So we can get *you* out of here."

Now, that was just not fair. "I didn't do this!"

"No," Toph bit out. "You just didn't stop it."

Feet struck the ground, and she rode a green wave away.

No, Aang admitted to himself. *I didn't*.

Why?

Because... Temul wasn't something he *could* do anything about. He couldn't bend to stop her. He couldn't *push* her, the way he did other spirits. And he couldn't fly away from a ghost.

And it wasn't supposed to be this way! He was the Avatar, and Toph expected him to go up against a *ghost* like somebody who couldn't even *bend*?

Like Sokka?

No. It wasn't the same. The spirits hadn't made Sokka a bender. That was their decision, and Sokka had to live with it. They *had* made *him* the Avatar. He was *supposed* to have the power to fix things.

Ghosts are just wrong.

Toph was right. They had to get out of here.

But someday, when he knew enough, he was coming back here. Because he was the Avatar.

And Temul was *never* going to hurt one of his friends again.

Sokka blinked. Squinched his eyes shut. Blinked again.

What the heck?

Five worried faces stared down at him as he lay against a garden boulder; one of them green-eyed and fuzzy, Momo's ears twitching as the lemur counted one lemur-scratcher back in the land of the living, and jumped back to Aang's shoulder. Toph was pale, Aang was downright grim, and Katara's eyes had that red puffiness that meant she'd been crying.

What'd I miss?

Wait. Temul, Piandao getting suspicious, finding Aang-

"Back with us?" Master Piandao said, brows arched with a hint of warning.

"Y-yeah," Sokka managed, sitting up. He didn't know why the great name of Shu Jing wanted to use the *suniyuktabhasha*, instead of *Uccanyayalaya*, but you followed your teacher's lead-

Oh no. No way...

And Katara was yelling at him, and Toph was breathing out with a relieved grin, and Aang was perking up and pestering him with a dozen variants on *what happened?*

Good question.

Even that thought felt wrong, a jumble of words that should have been familiar and sounds he shouldn't have known, and *ow*.

"Api kuzalam?"

"*Naiva,*" Sokka answered, Brain still trying to get up to speed. -"*I think she did something to me...*"-

Oh. Damn. Four sets of eyes staring at him, and only one had understood that. "I must have been driving you a little too hard," Piandao said lightly. "Quoting poetry in your sleep can get you in a great deal of trouble, young man." He winked. "Though not nearly as much as quoting it when you're awake."

"That was poetry?" Katara said skeptically. "It sounded like somebody trying to sing Seal."

"Seals don't talk," Sokka sighed. Trying not to let his whirling thoughts show on his face. *What the heck did she do?*

"That's what *you* say."

"You okay, Snoozles?"

Toph. Feet firmly on the ground as usual, and how had he never seen that careful balance for what it was; a ready stance that could take her anywhere she had to strike...

Sokka held his head in his hands. "Aang? I think I got your headache."

That cut off the airbender's chatter. "You mean, all those spooky threats, and talk about revenge, and scorpion-vipers - and she just gave you a *headache*?" Aang sputtered.

"Sorry about the scorpion-viper thing," Sokka said sheepishly. Aware - really, razor-edged *aware* - of everything he wasn't saying. *Aang can hear lies. But if I'm not lying...* "I had to bet on what I knew. She was angry, and she just wanted someone to *listen*. So I didn't argue with her. Not about stuff that wasn't important."

"Not important?" Katara's fingers brushed her bare midriff, inches from her waterskin.

"She already hates airbenders," Sokka pointed out. "That's what you did with the Painted Lady, right? Let her have her revenge. Just take it a way that most people don't get hurt." He rubbed his head. "I can take a headache." *I hope.*

"Yeah," Aang chuckled. "But you know, that was *crazy*."

"Hey, if it's crazy and it works..." Getting to his feet, Sokka let the world tilt back toward level. Looked past them, where a giant white-and-brown fluffball snorted. "You've got Appa packed already? I thought - well..."

"You have the basics, and a keen mind," Piandao observed. "Come back when time is more on your side." He smiled. "I understand you have a schedule."

Great. He was never going to live that down.

"Come on, let's go before she goes after Appa for munching the garden," Aang urged, latching onto his wrist.

"I'm coming," Sokka said, impatiently twisting out of the hold to Aang's surprised squawk. "Give me a minute, okay?"

Finally. All of them scrambling up on Appa, out of earshot. Sokka swallowed. "Master Piandao..."

"Even as a ghost, Temul is a dragon-child," the swordsman said plainly. "There are old stories of what they can do to the minds of men." Gray eyes met his. "How badly did she hurt you?"

"Not as bad as she would have hurt Aang." Sokka was sure of that, if nothing else. "She messed with my head. I'll deal with it. Aang - he's the Avatar. We need him in one piece."

Piandao watched him. "For his power?"

"No," Sokka said firmly. "Because everybody else *thinks* he's the only guy who can fix the world. Which is crazy, he's just a kid - but they don't see that. All they see is the legend. They need that. So, yeah. Better me than him."

"Spoken like a true tactician," Piandao nodded. "Be careful." He stepped forward, and-

What the heck?

He hadn't been hugged like that in *weeks*.

"Burning characters into silk is a fine art, not much practiced among firebenders these days. But it used to be the way all the great names kept their family scrolls, and Temul is as old-fashioned as they come," Piandao said, still holding him. "You should know that Temul *retrieved* those scrolls from the onmitsu. My name is in them, listing my adoption. And as of this morning... so is yours."

"Say what?" It wasn't a yell. More of a manly squeak. "But- but don't you guys ask before you go kidnapping somebody into your tribe, and I'm not a girl, and - oh spirits, Teruko said you did

husband-stealing, and Temul's way too old for me, not to mention *dead*-"

"You're not a husband. You're spoils of war," Piandao smirked. "And she's been at war with the Avatar a very long time."

She wanted revenge on Aang. She took it. "I'm Water Tribe!"

"I don't think she cares." Piandao grinned, stepping back. "So be careful about heroics around impressionable youngsters. Especially young firebenders. I doubt Aang would be very happy if you attracted your own clan."

...Dad's going to kill me.

Chapter End Notes

Akshara- letters of the alphabet. Also, sword.

Api kuzalam? - Are you all right?

Naiva - hardly; no!

jitakshara - one who has mastered his letters. Or, if one were making a pun (and Piandao would) - one who has mastered his sword.

Suniyuktabhasha - "built language"

Uccanyayalaya - High Court.

Chapter 55

"Death by Sokka's dad," Zuko grumbled under his breath as they waited on the middle dock. "Not the way I wanted to go."

Shirong gave him a telling look. "I'd hate to think you had a way you *did* want to go. Do we need more guards?"

I don't need guards! Zuko wanted to snap. But didn't. He knew exactly what advice Amaya would give to anyone who'd drowned. Or who'd been set on fire. Or faced off with spirits. Much less all three. And that would be *rest*. Stay calm. Take it easy a few days. As if they *had* a few days.

"Chief Hakoda is an honorable man," Zuko said instead. "If he planned to raid us, I think we'd know about it by now."

"Hmm."

"Besides. Wood's flammable."

"True." Shirong looked cheered by the thought.

Zuko tried not to raise his brow. Just what had people told Shirong about the Water Tribe, to spark that bloodthirsty a reaction?

One word. Katara, part of his mind pointed out.

Ah. Right. That mess. Maybe it would have been better to get Uncle Iroh off the cone after all.

No. Priorities. We need to figure out how to vent Asagitatsu, or none of this is going to work.

And Uncle had only proposed a couple days ago. Zuko was *not* going to subject Master Amaya to a whole fleet's worth of disgust for her necklace.

I can handle this.

And if he couldn't, Lieutenant Teruko, Archer Nagamasa, and Nagamasa's people had set up an interesting little crossfire. Arrows might not be much good against the drowned, but the Yu Yan were deadly against mere human foes.

Agni favors the side with the ranged weapons.

Breathe. Mentally check over his appearance one more time. Sheathed dao; there was no way Hakoda would be coming on shore unarmed. Copper-trimmed brown robe to replace the green the spirit world had seared to ash. No waterskin in sight; the bay would have to do, if he were pushed that hard. Hair pulled back with an old-fashioned flame ornament, and who knew how Madam Wen had kept that among her jewelry.

Not exactly princely standards of appearance. But Hakoda had seen him in worse.

Attitude. Take your stance. Wait.

From the looks on men's faces as Hakoda's ship pulled up to the dock, they were not happy to see him.

So what else is new?

The chief himself stepped onto the dock with the air of a man picking his way over swamp tussocks. The warriors behind him looked even less thrilled. "Prince Zuko. I didn't expect to see you here."

"Chief Hakoda," Zuko acknowledged. "I could say the same. Not too many people want to get close to an active volcano." *And how close you are... we'll just let that lie for now.* "The hawk we sent you came back without a reply."

"I didn't know what to say." Hakoda glanced at Shirong. "Are you still allies of the Earth King wasn't a question I expected from a Fire Nation exile."

Wait for it. Wait...

"And you of all people should know Ba Sing Se has fallen."

"The city will not fall while its true king reigns," Shirong said levelly. "Ba Sing Se might be occupied, but my people still fight."

"In more ways than one," Zuko stated. *That better have been enough diplomacy. We don't have time for this!* He jerked his head toward the temple mountain far above. "Sokka's been up there. So you know who's up there, and what he's done for the Fire Nation in the past. We're here to see his little airborne rebellion doesn't get derailed by a smart commander with archers and a good store of burning catapult ammunition. Gliders *burn*."

"You would know," Hakoda said dryly. "For such a helpful camp, this looks a lot like the start of a Fire Nation colony."

This is Dragons' Wings. This is hope... But he'd never understand. "Call it what you want. We told you why we're here." Zuko tried not to grit his teeth. "Why are you?"

"Where's your uncle?"

...Do not fry condescending Water Tribe barbarian, Zuko told himself. "General Iroh is currently working on how to talk a very cranky volcano out of *blowing the Northern Air Temple off the map*." He caught his breath. "If you want to talk to him, you can wait until *he's* found a good time to take a break."

"Unfortunately, it's true," Shirong said into the disbelieving silence. "I've only recently reported to the Earth King just how close Asagitsatsu is to erupting; we had no idea when he and the prince negotiated their treaty. Our own earthbenders have confirmed the danger, and the Earth King has full confidence that our allies can handle this. If anyone can."

Hakoda gave him a narrow look, but turned back to Zuko. "Then where's Captain Jee?"

Ready to turn you all into flaming splinters. For a moment, Zuko let the implied insult lie. *He might not know. He might not...*

But he'd seen that flick of calculating eyes at court before. *How hard can I push,* a noble's stance would snicker, *before he disgraces himself with unmannerly fury?*

Because that was *always* what happened. He couldn't play the game to save his life. All he could do was listen, and feel the venomous barbs sink home, and endure until he could escape...

Burn them. Drown them all.

No. Bad idea. Asagitatsu's flames were all that stood between them and more drowned; borrowing them to kill would *not* be wise.

But oh, it was so tempting.

"Chief Hakoda." Shirong's voice sounded like it'd taken a dip at the North Pole. "Am I to understand that you prefer not to deal with the authority the Earth King and the volcano's spirit herself recognizes as the lord of Dragons' Wings?"

Which, on the surface, gave Hakoda an out. All he had to do was say *yes*.

And if he did, Zuko knew, Shirong - and everyone else who wanted their settlement to be respected as *theirs*, by humans and the spirits - would cheerfully toss the entire Water Tribe fleet out on its ear.

Which meant things were about to escalate, quickly; and damn it, he didn't *want* a fight-

"Hey! Water Tribe!" Saoluan chirped. Waved from the shore end of the docks, Langxue weighing up the situation beside her. "We're going to go ask the gliders if they're going to start acting like neighbors, or try dropping bombs on us. Want to come?"

...And thank Agni for spyglasses, and giving your allies quick briefings at the drop of a blue-sailed disaster. Zuko watched Hakoda's expression veer from surprise to outrage to carefully-stifled dismay. And tried not to grin.

This time? I win.

Lifting all three of them and a pile of supplies up the mountainside on a circling snake of ice, Langxue finally sighed. "Okay. That was a little *too* close."

"You said it," Saoluan agreed, glancing back at the bay far below. "Did you see those fires jumping out there? I thought we were going to have crispy Southerners in another minute."

Actually, he'd been watching the water surge furiously around the dock pilings. Another minute, a few more vicious words, and it would have been razor-edged ice.

And we'd have been short one Water Tribe fleet.

Well... probably not. Zuko had a grip on his temper. Just, not one Langxue wanted to test to destruction.

"My daughter could tell you how dangerous he is," Hakoda said grimly.

"Katara, right?" Langxue snorted. "I'll take *deliberate threat over spoiled brat starting a riot* any day. Why didn't *you* tie her up? You're her chief. And you could have used ropes."

...Which might not have been the best thing he could say, Langxue realized, catching Saoluan's wince, and the incredulous outrage on Hakoda's face. "You expect me to attack my own *daughter*?" Hakoda exclaimed.

"It's what we do on Kyoshi Island, if a waterbender won't control himself." Saoluan gave the chief a searching look, eyes framed dark in a white-painted face. "But we usually use ropes way before it gets to riots. A waterbender who's too mad to listen, pulling on people's hearts? People *die*. That's

the kind of thing that gets you thrown to the Unagi." She held up a gloved hand. "Little brother? Stop the ice."

Oh, this is going to be good. A downward slash of his hands halted them; Langxue stepped off onto solid earth, and crossed his arms with a cold, neutral face. *See? Not bending. Being polite.*

Only from Hakoda's frown, he didn't recognize the stance at all. What the heck?

"We've only heard what the crew on *Suzuran* could tell us," Saoluan said matter-of-factly.

"Wouldn't surprise me if they exaggerated a little. They were probably expecting a full-scale tsunami if she didn't stop. Something that would break *Suzuran's* back and send her to the bottom. Just like the invasion fleet." She shrugged. "So. What happened?"

Hakoda looked down the slope, toward the harbor. "You expect me to believe they thought Katara could sink their ship?"

"She's the Avatar's teacher," Langxue said bluntly. "She probably can."

Hakoda started to object... and stopped. Looked Langxue up and down. "Could you?"

"Metal, and that big? Probably not," Langxue shrugged. "Captain Jee's been up against waterbenders. He knows to steer into the waves. But wooden ships? Water Tribe ships?" He winced. "Yes. I can."

Hakoda took a step back. "You have."

"No!" But that wasn't all the truth. "I *didn't*. But... when I was a kid..." He hunched his shoulders at the memory. "After the storm - the Shengs took me in. But the first time we went out fishing, and a wind came up - they threw me overboard. They *had* to."

The chief's shoulders stiffened, blue cloth rippling. "They *threw* you-"

"I had a rope!" Langxue bit his lip, trying to squash a flare of anger. How did this Water Tribe chief think he had any reason to judge *his* village? He'd been tossing waves in a tantrum; at least their way, no one had died!

"His family died in a storm," Saoluan said quietly. "He got washed ashore. Nobody believes he sank the ship-"

"Yeah, right," Langxue snarled under his breath.

"-But even a kid waterbender can do a lot of damage in a panic. Make waves worse. Lurch the water in the bilge, so the ship heels over at just the wrong moment. *Freeze* the water, right in the planks, so the whole hull splits at the seams. *Nobody* in the village would take Langxue out on the water. Not for years. Not until he could tamp it down and not *feel* instead of *think*. It wasn't safe." She frowned. "Your tribe lives out on the ice, right? Has Katara ever lost her temper? *Really* lost it?"

Blue eyes narrowed in a way that said Hakoda knew exactly what Saoluan was implying. "My daughter would *never* harm her people."

"You think Langxue wanted to hurt the Shengs?" Saoluan fired back. "Benders get upset. They *bend*. They don't always know they're bending. Not unless you can yank them around to see it." She let a breath sigh out. "Zuko said Katara was about to start a riot. Trying to get your warriors to start killing people, when all he wanted to do was leave. On the island? Would've been my job to

sit on her. So what did you see happen?"

"I saw the arrogant young son of the man who ordered my wife's death. Laying hands on *my daughter*." Hakoda's mouth was a grim line. "The last Southern waterbender. The hope of our tribe."

"Who was *that* close to smashing up your whole fleet, just because she got ticked off!" Langxue snapped.

"My daughter might need practice with her bending, but she would never deliberately harm her tribe," Hakoda said firmly. "Waterbenders are blessed by the spirits. We show them honor and respect. We don't abuse waterbending children when they make a mistake. And we don't murder them." He pointed down toward the harbor. "That firebender is the son, and grandson, and *great*-grandson of men who've done their worst to destroy the world. Why are warriors from Kyoshi Island anywhere near these... people?"

And if Zuko had heard *that* tone, Langxue knew, the ships would be ash even now. *And I'm not sure I'd try to stop him.* "He saved my life."

"Did he," Hakoda said flatly. "Why?"

Because he's in the same spooky boat I am. Because we both got drafted by the spirits - your La in specific. Because he's a good guy, even if he is twitchy as a rattle-viper on a hot rock. "You know what? I don't care. I was going to die. He got me out of it. Now we're on top of the volcano that killed Avatar Yangchen, and he's trying to stop it from taking out Avatar Aang. I'm going to *help*. What are you going to do?"

Hakoda looked him up and down again. Less the look he'd give a kid, and more one he'd grant one of the tribe's young warriors. "That lump of smoking rock can kill an Avatar?"

"Oh, let me," Saoluan said with gruesome glee. "That rock?" She pointed down to the cone. "That's just an itty-bitty tip-toe of Asagitatsu." She waved her arms wide at the whole caldera. "Your ships? They're *sitting* in Asagitatsu."

Hakoda choked. "That firebender didn't- you're living in-!"

"Didn't you know? Firebenders *like* living in volcanoes. Gives them an edge." Langxue smirked a little. "Like waterbenders living in ice."

Blue eyes narrowed, obviously considering that.

Huh. Wonder why? None of the colonies on the Eastern Continent are in volcanoes. What's he after-

The western islands. Had to be. Zuko was *right*.

An invasion. Oh, monkeyfeathers.

"So yes, Asagitatsu can kill an Avatar," Langxue said, before Hakoda could bring up something even more unsettling. "And it did. Ba Sing Se and the Northern Water Tribe both have records. Avatar Yangchen died here." He felt it in his bones. He *knew* it, as he knew the landscape they'd skimmed over; ghosts of autumn foliage fading into the herbs of mountain summer. *I knew this place. Long ago.*

Hyourin had known it. He... well. He kind of wished he didn't.

"Airbenders are really vulnerable to breathing ash," Langxue made himself go on. "They're meant to breathe really high, really *thin* air. They don't... have as much protection as us lowlanders." And nowhere *near* as much as dragon-children. Ash and smoke just did *not* kill them the way it would most humans. "Their healers can fix ash - at least, that's what the stories say - but when's the last time anyone saw an airbending healer? If Asagitatsu goes - if Aang gets downwind of it, even as far away as Ba Sing Se..." He winced. "It could kill him."

"My daughter's a healer," Hakoda objected.

"Great," Langxue drawled. "Does she know how to handle mortar in somebody's lungs? That's what it's like." He shuddered. "It's a really ugly way to die."

"Hey." Saoluan rested a hand on his shoulder, careful to keep clear of his draw. "Relax. The Face-Stealer works through the sea, right? We'll be fine up here."

"Yeah, I hope," Langxue muttered. Trying not to see memories of those choked and dying from Asagitatsu's first rumbles centuries ago; gasping, breathless wrecks of bodies, crying for breath that could not come. Trying not to feel Hyouurin's terror, as they'd realized Asagitatsu *would not* be stopped. Not by an Avatar. Not by anyone.

Trying not to remember heat and failure and dark-snow-flecks of glass shredding his lungs from the inside out-

Don't. Don't think about it.

In dreams he saw them all; choking, burning, dying. In dreams Zuko failed, and Asagitatsu mocked them with lightning-laughter from burning clouds as the drowned swarmed over them. His spirit could only watch, powerless, as dead flesh tore them apart...

In dreams, the dead all had Saoluan's face.

Langxue drew in a breath, trying not to shake. Pushing the horror *away*. "Sorry. I just... keep seeing it." *You could have died. You could have died right in front of me. And I wouldn't have known until it was too late.*

"The Gnawer?" Hakoda looked as if he wanted to jump down-slope and roll back to his fleet. "What did Zuko do to offend him?"

"Kept breathing," Langxue growled. Pulled on the lighter pack - he *knew* Saoluan would fuss at him if he took the heavier one, sheesh, he wasn't a *baby* - gathered up ice with a curl of his hands, and started walking. And made himself just... breathe. *In and out. Calm. Zuko's not the only one who wants to break things.*

It wasn't just how close Saoluan had come to dying. It was the price, the damned infuriating *price* of being what he was.

We stand between. We can walk to the very shore of the spirits' sea, and come back.

And all it cost was prying a yāorén's spirit from his body. Just a *little*.

Spirits weren't supposed to come loose from live bodies. It left a mismatch in your chi. A ragged edge to everything you thought, everything you felt. And the only way to fix it was to spend time just *being*. And hope you healed.

But he wasn't about to explain that to Chief Hakoda. Not to someone who *knew* firebenders had a

temper... and who'd deliberately pushed Zuko's as far as he could.

"We don't know why, but the Face-Stealer wants Asagitatsu to erupt," Langxue said instead. "We ended up fighting for our lives against dead men." He glared up at the sky, where gliders circled. "And they just *watched*."

"Easy," Saoluan murmured. "How much can they see from up there, anyway? We came on *Suzuran*. And the last time the Fire Nation- oh."

For a long moment, the twisted darkness in front of them didn't make sense. It was hard-edged, but not rock; flecked with orange-red, and specks of dirty tan...

Bone. Those are bone fragments.

And now Langxue could see where metal had torn, a jagged rip through the emblem of Ozai's Flame. The massive steel and iron carriage had twisted, the way only wind and unforgiving stone could manage. Bones were half inside, half scattered around the chilling wreck, shattered like ice dropped from the top of a cliff.

He looked up from the rusted chain and crumpled grappling hook, searching the cliff face for scars. Found them, thousands of feet above. "They never had a chance."

"They were attacking the Mechanist's people," Hakoda said levelly.

"So what? I can't feel sorry for them?" Langxue flared. "They *saw it coming*. You know that, don't you? Either a bomb, or the Avatar, or your *daughter*; something blasted them loose, and they fell. They *knew* they were falling." He closed his eyes, and shook his head. "At least if somebody stabs you, you know they were just better than you."

"Dead is dead," Hakoda began.

"He means they could have left ghosts," Saoluan cut him off. "That's bad for all of us." She jabbed a gloved finger down toward the water. "We were fighting *drowned corpses* because their ghosts were in the Face-Stealer's power. Have you ever tried killing dead bodies?" Her voice edged up a little, shaking at the edges. "I know you guys like to fight, but trust me. It's not fun!"

"Sis." Langxue caught her hand. Pulled her arm around him in a deliberate hug. "It's okay. We'll tell Zuko. He'll get someone up here to... do what it takes for a memorial." He scowled at the chieftain. "You think Zuko's the enemy? Fine. But there's no shamans up here. No priests. No sages! *Nobody* who can lay Fire ghosts to rest. Except two princes, who are trying to keep us all alive. The royal family *aren't* chiefs like you. They've got the authority to deal with ghosts. Whether they like it or not." Sea-green eyes narrowed. "You know spirits can cross into our world on solstice nights. But you've never seen a horde of Fire ghosts, because they're Fire, they're *summer*, and you have *midsummer sun*. Here? We *don't*. What do you think's going to happen to that Temple, if Zuko doesn't do *something* before the solstice?"

"If the volcano doesn't get us all first," Saoluan muttered.

Hakoda's brows bounced up, and he looked over shattered metal again. "Why?" he said at last. "He's Ozai's son."

And to Water, family was everything. "And he's Shidan's grandson," Langxue shot back. "We *met* that cranky old dragon. Byakko thinks the war is crazy."

Hakoda folded his arms. "Crazy or not, you're a Kyoshi Islander. And you're willing to speak for

the prince who burned your homes?"

"Yes."

Hakoda's eyes narrowed. He shook his head.

And if that wasn't a silent, *you're all insane, but I'm not rude enough to say it*, Langxue would take dishes duty for the next week.

"Like you said, we're Kyoshi Islanders." Saoluan smirked, with a coy toss of her hair. "The same people who sat this war out for a hundred years. How come you're not mad at us?"

Oh great, Langxue almost groaned. *That's not going to work-*

"We're at war with the Fire Nation," Hakoda said levelly. "We need all the help we can get."

Painted brows arched, Saoluan jerked a thumb back toward the harbor.

"...You can't be serious."

"You don't have to like him," Saoulun shrugged. "Heck, you don't even have to really trust him. Think about it. He's an *exile*. Any of the Fire Lord's guys who land here are going to come straight for *his* throat. Not your Mechanist friend's."

Hakoda started to speak, and thought better of it. Looked back at the harbor. "Hmm."

Langxue tried not to bounce on his toes. The man was thinking. They had to give him a little time.

Frowning, Hakoda looked up to the Temple far above. "Are you really worried they'll drop bombs?"

"We have natural gas coming up all kinds of places. We're not sure where all of them are, yet." Langxue settled the pack on his shoulders a bit better. "We don't know what they're planning. So we're going to find out. How about you?"

"I suppose we'll see, then."

He doesn't trust us, either. Terrific.

But around the next bend in the path was the metal cable-carriage-thing Zuko had described; with luck, their way up.

Here goes everything.

They don't make sense, Hakoda thought, standing in the shadows of the Temple's main courtyard as Langxue and Saoluan shared out those bulky packs they'd dragged up on the metal platform ride - and hadn't *that* been enough to set an honest man's teeth on edge, dangling in the air higher than birds?

Yet the contents of those packs were even more disturbing. Rice. Dried fish. Other bits and sundries Hakoda recognized as Fire Nation and Earth Kingdom travel supplies, everything as lightweight and travel-tough as a man could make it. Even the sugared limon slices for the children had their place; if you had some unthinkable aversion to sea prunes, which most other nations did, you *needed* those on shipboard.

"He knows you're hungry." Hakoda kept his voice low as he spoke to the Mechanist. No sense taking chances even with Kyoshi Islanders. Not when they seemed to think Ozai's son was *trustworthy*. And not just for a truce. They could say whatever they liked; those two were *living* with the Fire Nation. That was... unsettling. "That's dangerous."

"I'm afraid General Iroh has always known a frightening amount about us." Ji tapped his monocle absently, watching his neighbors. "I think he may have been one of those who argued for us to be left alone here to begin with. Well... mostly alone." He sighed. "I suppose we didn't really think it through. The Avatar was here, we'd won our freedom, we were well stocked for the winter..."

And now summer was on them. Hakoda nodded, gauging the appearance of the wives and children gathered around the gifts. Measuring looks of worry, and guarded relief. *They're not starving yet. But they know it could happen, if something doesn't go right soon.* "There's nothing up here you can hunt, or gather?"

"There are fruit trees, and some gardens run wild that we've reclaimed. The chicken-pigs can forage for themselves, mostly. And there are a few fish in the high streams we can get to. Outside of that - no, not much." Ji sighed. "Even if there were, the gliders can only carry so much weight. Our balloon does better, but it's quite visible. I would hate to repay our relatives down the slope for their grain by bringing them unwanted attention."

"Relatives?" Hakoda straightened, curious.

"Not everyone from our village wanted to build a life in the air," Ji admitted. "Even of those who came with us, a few couldn't handle living in the Temple. Especially our herbalist, Chunhua. She stayed long enough to be sure Teo was healing... well, as much as he ever will. Yet she just kept getting frailer, like a drying reed. She says it was because she couldn't feel the turning of the earth, or some such poet's nonsense. Though I suppose she has a point, of sorts. The seasons aren't the same up here. It's the wind that drives what we can do, and when." He brightened. "But you've brought us a challenge, yes? Wonderful!"

Bemused, Hakoda followed him down corridors and through odd doors, stopping at a room more cluttered than an Earth Kingdom armory. Ji spread Sokka's scribbling over a half-covered desk, and sat to study it with a happy sigh.

"Sokka's never been very artistic," Hakoda felt compelled to add.

Wooden fingers clacked as Ji waved it off. "Minor representational details! Blueprints can come later. What matters is the idea to be explored, and tested!" He gazed at the paper with the look of a man who has seen the hunt of his dreams...

Frowned, and turned the paper around. "What am I looking at, exactly?"

Drawing on his memory of that excited conversation with Sokka, Hakoda reached past him, moving the image a quarter-turn right. "Metal fish, with waterbenders inside." He just hoped there were as many waterbenders in the Foggy Swamp as Sokka said. Waterbending where there wasn't any ice? Unreal.

Waterbenders on Kyoshi Island. That's more than unreal.

Saoluan was right. He *was* angry at them. If he'd known to send Katara there for training; if they'd broken their precious neutrality and helped, even a few years earlier...

If's catch no whales, Hakoda reminded himself firmly. *You've got a load in the net. Don't lose it.*

"Firebenders and water don't mix. Usually," he amended, recalling a certain irritating prince and towering spouts of flame-wrapped waves. He'd never seen anything like it before that day, and he hoped no one ever saw it again. "Sokka thinks if we go under the water..."

"Like the drill, carving through a medium they never dreamed needed to be protected," the Mechanist said, half to himself. "The size will be the tricky part."

"The size?" Hakoda echoed, not certain he'd heard correctly.

"The larger they are, the more air they can contain," Ji said matter-of-factly. "But larger 'fish', so to speak, will also be more difficult to push through the water. You've seen that with ordinary ships, I'm sure."

Hakoda scowled. "The Fire Nation never seems to have any trouble."

"Oh, they do. You'd be surprised how much trouble they do have, even with coal engines to power them," the Mechanist said absently. "That freighter in the harbor? It's not the size for one of their massive cargo ships, or their troopships. It could probably put on enough speed to outmatch your fleet. But it's certainly not one of their fast assault ships. Cargo or speed; they can do one or the other. That one tries to do both, so it's probably not much of a success at either. I can't imagine why it's still in service, unless they just didn't bother breaking it up for scrap..." He tapped the drawing. "Mining. That's what we should draw from. Miners know how much air we need, and how much weight a bender can move. With those numbers - yes. We can do this. Wait, I have some scrolls around here somewhere..."

Hakoda found a patch of wall that didn't have something propped against it or hanging from it, and settled back to watch Ji hunt knowledge down. He wanted some time to think, anyway.

What is Zuko up to?

The young man was the Fire Lord's son, when all was said and done. He had to be up to *something*.

Which was why he'd played angry Water Tribe barbarian to the hilt. Firebenders never looked past it.

...Well. Almost never.

It wasn't all an act. He'd like nothing better than to ambush that spark-throwing noble arrogance and lay him out cold behind an igloo. Preferably in the middle of a winter night. Bad enough he'd bound Katara in his fire. But that letter-!

He almost killed my daughter. With a piece of paper.

If Zuko could do that with just ink and words, Hakoda didn't want to know what he could manage with armed men. And a ship. And a bay that was actually a volcano, where the very water was *on fire*.

...And Bato was right. He *was* an idiot. Pricking at a youngster's overblown ego might have been fun, and even necessary. But meeting Zuko over water where fire already burned? They'd seen him use oil before.

Not your brightest day, Hakoda admitted. *You keep seeing a firebender. When it seems, in his head, he's a warrior.*

That was hard to grasp. The tribe elders who'd discussed waterbenders with him as he was growing

up, and Kanna especially, had always given him the impression that benders never used steel. The spirits had gifted them with power, and using any lesser weapon would be an offense in their eyes.

Apparently, neither Zuko nor Langxue had had a Kanna in their lives.

And we've seen where that's led the Fire Nation, haven't we?

Led them, and their so-called royal family. *Why* was Langxue so convinced they needed Zuko to deal with ghosts? Iroh, Hakoda could believe might deal with spirits. Elders of the tribe were always the closest to the spirit world. But a young man barely more than his son's age? Not likely. Langxue couldn't know what he was talking about...

But those eyes.

He'd seen them on a few of the elders, when he was a much younger man. Ancient, distant eyes. Eyes that had been where no human should walk, and seen what no living man was meant to see.

Ancient eyes, that chilling streak of white hair in dark... Langxue was spirit-touched. He knew it, Bato knew it, the whole *fleet* knew it.

Which was likely why Bato hadn't argued too hard about letting him go off alone. It'd take a braver man than anyone should have to be to walk with a spirit-touched bender...

And the Fire Nation troops had apparently been doing just that. Were they crazy?

Shirong said the volcano's spirit recognized Zuko as a lord here.

Could that be true? And if so - what did it mean for his people?

"Yes. We can do it," Ji said abruptly. "The only problem will be getting enough metal, now that the Fire Nation is no longer supplying us." He paused for a moment, bearded face bent in a wry, quiet smile. "Well. Perhaps they'll supply us even now. Those monstrous tanks ought to be put to *some* good use."

Under other circumstances, Hakoda would agree with him. Turn your enemy's weapons against him? It was only fitting.

But if Langxue *were* spirit-touched...

"There might be a problem with some of those tanks."

Saoluan squashed the urge to creep across the stone courtyard-glider landing spot. Straightened her shoulders, and walked jauntily over to Langxue's side. Like they weren't staring out into a gulf of nothing but air and clouds. "Wow. That is a *long* way down."

"Yeah," her little brother said absently. Hand out, flattened, to feel the warm wind rising over stone. "Um. I think maybe La picked the wrong person."

"What? You mean you're not dying to fling yourself off the side with nothing but some bamboo and cloth holding you up?" Saoluan teased.

"No."

Ouch. Well, that was definite. "Hey, first things first, right?" She kept her tone light, reaching out to grip that thin shoulder. "They're *already* flying. You just find somebody you can teach to bend.

Let *them* handle the swooping through the air part."

"But I'm supposed to do it!"

She heard the metal-on-stone of someone heading their way with a cart, but they weren't in earshot yet. "Did she say that? Seriously. Did she? Maybe you've got air, but you're *water*. Teaching airbenders, if we can find any - that's going to be plenty of work. You can't teach someone swordsmanship if you're worried about cutting yourself. Why should you have to teach flying?"

"I'm *not* afraid of flying!"

"Seriously?" A cheerful young voice broke in, over the rumble of approaching wheels. "Katara was scared her first time, and she'd been flying on Appa for months."

Saoluan looked; blinked, and looked a bit farther down. "Teo, right?"

Wheeling his chair up to them, the boy smirked a little. "What gave it away?"

"It's the ears," Saoluan said, mock-serious. "Your father's are a little more singed, but they match."

Teo laughed, bringing his wheels to a halt. "Is everybody on Kyoshi Island like you?"

"The whole island would float away if we were," Langxue muttered.

"Already did that, once," Saoluan said cheerfully. "Hey! Maybe that's why Chin Village still hates us. Kyoshi didn't just kick Chin's ass; she did it hammered!"

Both boys were staring at her, appalled. "You know, if Oyaji heard you say that," Langxue managed, "he'd have dumped us *both* off the island. Boat or no boat." He paused. "On the other hand... boy, would that explain a lot."

"You think an *Avatar* would get drunk?" Teo sputtered.

"Sure. Why not?" Saoluan shrugged. "They're human, right? Kyoshi saw the kind of burned villages Chin left behind. Who *wouldn't* get drunk?"

Teo stared at her. Drummed his fingers on one wheel, suddenly thoughtful. "We don't hear much about Chin the Conqueror up here." He hesitated, deliberately. "A lot about the Fire Nation."

"We saw the tanks," Langxue nodded.

Teo's jaw set, stubborn. "We can do it again."

"Don't see why you'd want to," Saoluan said casually. "Zuko doesn't have tanks." She gave him her best *I am a Kyoshi Warrior and can whip your scrawny little butt* look. "Didn't you guys read the treaty Zuko sent up here? The Earth King gave him Dragons' Wings so there wouldn't be any more tanks heading up here. Or other problems."

"Other problems?" Teo said warily. "You mean like that smoke dragon we saw?"

"Asagitatsu is going to be part of the solution, not the problem," Langxue said confidently. "But what she was after... yeah. *That* other problem."

"You mean the other Fire Nation soldiers?" Teo pounced. "Everybody saw the armor! And you let that thing light them on *fire*?"

Saoluan bristled, ready to give this ungrateful little brat a piece of her mind-

"You were too high up," Langxue said; a quiet statement of fact. "You couldn't see it. They were already dead."

Teo swept an arm across to brush away the argument; Saoluan squinted, as wind suddenly gusted dust in her eyes. "Anything that burns like that *is* already dead. Yeah, I know, I've seen what happens with natural gas-

"No." Langxue's voice was level. It prickled the hairs on her neck. "They were *already dead*. We were being attacked by *drowned men*. Bodies, from the Invasion of the North. Controlled by a spirit who wants us *all* dead. Including you."

Teo shook his head. "That's not possible. Dead is dead. Sure, the Avatar's a powerful bender. But spirits don't really get involved in our lives."

Langxue raised an eyebrow.

"...You're *serious*."

"Wish he wasn't," Saoluan shuddered. "You ever hack something to pieces and have it keep trying to kill you? Spirits are real. And some of them are very, very bad news."

Teo looked between them, eyes wide. Put his head down, lip gripped between his teeth as one hand fingered a wheel.

Shifting her weight from foot to foot, Saoluan waited.

"Come on," Teo said at last. "There's somebody you need to talk to."

Which led to climbing ramps, passing in and out of walled areas, and finally rounding a bend into a long, cozy hall that'd been taken over as a mass kitchen, full of pots rattling, bowls clinking in sinks, and more eager kids helping out than Saoluan had ever seen in one place. She could already smell their rice cooking.

"Aunt Changchang," Teo called over the tumult and splash of soapy water. "Auntie, they need to talk to you."

"Throw in all the fish-scraps and fern-bits," a heavyset matron in dark green was directing one of the girls tending a bubbling pot. "A little rice will make those go a long way, child. Teo." She glanced up. "I know you know better than to get tangled up near fires and boiling water, so...?"

"It's important."

"I imagine so." Wiping her hands on a towel, Changchang patted a tiny dishwasher on the head. Made her way toward them, and off to the right of the doorway, out of the way of concentrating cooks. "Well, now. You have a problem your father can't put right with a pulley and some genius?"

Teo shifted in his chair, obviously uncomfortable. "They say we have a problem with spirits."

"Do they, now." Changchang focused on Langxue. Held his gaze for a long breath, and sighed. "Oh, child. What were they thinking? You're so young for this. Even my Great-Gran Changpu was older, when the earth started whispering to her... come here."

Gulping, Langxue let her hug him, eyes scrunched shut. "I can do it. I *have* to."

"I know. I know, child." Changchang patted his back. "But don't you forget the rest of us can help. Great-Gran was spirit-touched, long before these youngsters were ever born. Maybe we can't fight what we can't see. But we sure can help *you* kick its sorry ass."

"Auntie?" Teo squeaked.

"You knew someone who was spirit-touched?" Saoluan pounced. *I do not feel jealous. I'm his big sister. He could use an Auntie.*

"She knew the flood was coming," Changchang said firmly. "Not soon enough. But some of us made it." She let go. "So. Tell an old Auntie what's so bad, the Great Spirits tossed some child from Kyoshi Island all the way up to the top of the world?"

Langxue swallowed, and scrubbed his eyes. "It started over a thousand years ago..."

Chapter 56

Chapter Notes

Warning, Azula. And at least one dead body.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"You know, sneaking looks so much easier when Zuko does it," Azula commented.

Holding up the feet of a very dead man so they didn't leave drag marks in the palace's secret passages, Mai walked on, shaking her head.

"I mean," Azula grunted slightly, shifting the lump of meat and bone on her shoulder, "his bending was always so pathetic, and Mother was always babying him... you'd think, if he could do it, it couldn't be that hard."

Azula. Complaining. Despite the situation, Mai almost smiled. "He always liked stalking better. You like the kill."

"Not this one," Azula grumbled. "It's *inconvenient*."

Trying not to think too hard about the cooling clothed lumps in her grip, Mai rolled her eyes. "A dead Fire Sage is a lot more than inconvenient."

"They'll report him missing, and when they do Father's going to find him. I *know*," Azula said grimly. "He'll dig up the gardens, dredge the harbor, yank up the wells... sooner or later, he'll find the body." She frowned. "We could try disguising ourselves and leaving it in some noble's bedroom. Preferably so the wife could find it first. But they have guards, who will *not* be as complacent as Ba Sing Se soldiers, and I don't think Ty Lee would appreciate me slaughtering half a dozen people to cover one mistake." She stopped at a corner, and Mai caught her thoughtful look in the green glow of the Dai Li crystal she carried. "I don't think I like it either. It's so... messy."

"Inefficient," Mai suggested. Sometimes, you just had to know what reached Azula.

"Yes! Exactly." Azula considered the angle, lifting her part of the body higher so they could squeeze around the corner without brushing the walls. "Not that they're the best, but they are trained warriors. We might need them when the Avatar attacks the capital. If only for boulder fodder."

"You're sure he will," Mai observed. "Even when he knows you know his plans?"

"He's being advised by the Water Tribes and the Earth Kingdom," Azula said impatiently. "The barbarians still work off a lunar calendar, and the Earth Kingdom just thinks the sun is a useful thing to have for growing crops. *Try* telling them the moving stars are really other worlds. Or that anyone can predict where they move, and when." She rolled her eyes. "I don't know how Sokka found out what day the eclipse will be, but given he didn't put the actual date in his plan? I guarantee you he doesn't think *we* know it."

"Good point," Mai acknowledged, backing and filling until she was sure not even a fringe of red robes would brush stone. "You could ask Agent Bolin-"

"No!" Azula's voice snapped, whip-sharp. "Father knows I have Dai Li. He'll question them." Her mouth was a hard line. "They need to know nothing."

Mai winced. "They wouldn't betray you."

"You think they'd have a choice?" Gold gleamed in green light, angry. "I took them from Long Feng. Father could take them from me. He'd *make* them betray me."

And that would be one betrayal too many, Mai realized. Azula was holding herself together, despite what Fire Lord Ozai had implied about her continued usefulness as his heir. But only because she had someone trustworthy at her back.

"I can't hide this anywhere we might be connected with," Azula thought out loud. "I definitely can't bury it. If only I could make it disappear..."

She halted, a vicious smile spreading over her face. "Turn around. We need to take a different route."

"To where?" Mai obliged, backing up. That smile never boded well.

"The Fire Lady's quarters."

Closed for over thirty years, ever since Fire Lady Ilah had passed. A good place to buy them time, if nothing else. "We could wrap him tightly, and you could use a low flame to steam him dry," Mai offered. "I've heard bodies found in the desert don't even smell."

"Something like that..."

Even left to spider-flies and dust, Ilah's quarters were still rich, red water-silk trimmed with golden sea-silk like the first gleam of dawn. Mai stared past shimmering threads, for a moment wondering what life would have been like as one of the *ama* diving for pinna mussels. Working half-naked in the sea all day, coming home to a warm fire and a sea-grape-growing husband... there could be worse lives.

But I wouldn't be able to hide all my knives. Tricky.

"Over here."

Mai had seen fire-locks before. But never one that had needed Azula's long, sharp nails to press specific points, and turn, before the door would open.

The stone stairs down were steep, carved for one who had no patience with awkward burdens. The scent of hot rock wafted from the tunnels below, ominous as a noble's court smile.

Staring at the yellow-hot lava in front of them, Mai tried not to swallow too obviously.

"And *one*," Azula said confidently. "And *two*, and-"

She'd smelled worse, as the body sank into molten stone. She *had*.

The princess had a satisfied smile on her face. "The records say Great-Grandmother loved this place."

Mai let her brows climb. "I've never heard much about Fire Lady Tejjina."

"Oh, she was *interesting*," Azula stared at dancing flames. "She recorded just how close you can

bring someone to lava before their hair starts burning off. Among other things."

...And maybe I don't want to hear much now. "Where did you read that?"

"Oh, Father read it first. He told me the stories, every night. The executions, the interrogations... what?"

"These were..." Mai swallowed, somehow not surprised at all. "Bedtime stories?"

"They were *mine*." Azula looked stubborn. "Zuko had his time with Mother. Father spent time with *me*."

"He didn't tell her how he spent it," Mai muttered.

"What? Of course he did! Zuko was just too squeamish-"

"That's what he told you, isn't it. It's *wrong*. If she knew..." Mai tried to keep her voice level, despite the sudden, boiling rage in her veins. "If she ever knew, Azula, she would have taken you and run. Even if she had to leave Zuko behind."

"But she loved him more." Azula had turned to look at her, wide-eyed.

"That wouldn't have mattered." Agni, how to explain it? "Zuko... he protects himself. There are things he won't do. No matter who tries to make him. You... you love your father. You'll try to do anything for him. Lady Ursa knew that. We met Shidan. She's his *daughter*. If she had to choose, she would have taken you."

For a long moment, Azula was utterly silent. "...We should get back before we're missed."

Mai nodded. And bit her lip on what she wanted to say.

She would have saved you, Azula. Someone would have saved you.

Maybe we still can.

There was, Azula assured herself as she knelt, no way her father could know about the body she and Mai had tipped into the lava river under the city. Or the various interesting tidbits she'd found on certain genealogies. Or the information she'd dragged out of the Dragonbone Catacombs on onmitsu. None. Absolutely.

...She hoped.

Outwardly at ease, she waited.

"You do not support my plan for the invasion."

Azula's head snapped up, indignant. "You are the Fire Lord, Father! Who dares say I do not support you?"

Beyond the flames, Ozai's smile was thin. "If you favored my plan for dealing with the Avatar's rabble, daughter, you would not have been unavailable when Commander Toke brought you rumors of his location."

Trap. Given what she and Mai had found in the catacombs, she knew all too well why.

Oh, there wasn't anything *obvious* in the records. Her father wasn't *crude*. But if you'd skimmed the pattern of genealogy requests - as she had - and hunted up who had gotten which advantageous contracts to build or make that couldn't quite be explained in terms of past services and resources...

She was the prodigy. The heir.

But if there was one thing Grandfather had taught them all, it was this: *Always have a backup plan.*

Azula hid a smirk. *Too bad he didn't have one for Mother.*

Then again, Ursa tended to improvise rather than plan. Which explained a lot about Zuko.

"Commander Toke has brought me no such rumors," Azula stated. Strict truth, as she met pale gold eyes. "Perhaps he got lost on the way to my quarters. It's happened before. Usually with a servant girl involved." Now, just the slightest raised eyebrow. "Or perhaps his orders didn't cover informing me at all. Information has been a bit... slow... since Ty Lee turned down a request to visit her family. Which was *very* rude of them. I need her here, for strategic reasons. Especially if the Avatar dares to follow through on his plan. And her clan has information enough to deduce that. Forcing her into a situation where she must refuse an invitation by her clan elders - it lacks grace. And subtlety. What were they thinking?"

She feared she had a very good idea what they were thinking. Get Ty Lee away from her, get her back to where they could mindbend her again...

No. I won't have it.

She'd consulted with Agent Bolin and the rest of her little cadre of Dai Li on just how you might fix someone who'd been broken that way. Just in case her precautions failed, and Ty Lee vanished into their clutches again.

Besides. She wanted her *own* onmitsu. And how better to win them than by setting them free?

"Perhaps," her father said glacially, "they realized we are in the heart of our power, and need not resort to *pretense*."

A stab of words; not meant to hit the heart, but to draw blood, weakening her in slow torture.

Endure. Deflect it. "If they think so, they are the fools Ty Lee only pretends to be. We have ample evidence of the Avatar suborning sane, civilized people to his cause. Kyoshi Island, breaking their neutrality. A pacified prison coal rig, up in a riot. A *Fire Sage*, of all people, bowing his head to the Avatar!"

Azula had to catch her breath there, gripped by true fury. What had Sage Shiyu been *thinking*?

It doesn't matter. In Boiling Rock, he'll have the rest of his life to regret it.

"Who knows how loyal the rest of them are?" Azula finished, eyes narrowed.

Parry; deflect. Did I deal with your missing Sage? Or is he gone for reasons of his own?

She hated deceiving her father. Even if... well, even if what she'd found evidence for *might* be true.

But there's no time to convince him it doesn't matter. The eclipse is just weeks away. Our preparations must not get sidetracked. Not now! Not for something as - as pathetic as making sure he loves me.

I am the heir. I have a duty.

"And that's leaving aside the rash of civil disturbances the Avatar's caused as he scouts our nation," Azula went on. The flow of information to her might have slowed, but she still had listening ears. "Nothing else could have destroyed the Jang Hui factory." Her lip curled in distaste. "General Mung got off easy with death. Deliberately dumping the tailings in a working fishery? Fish are as critical to the war effort as steel. More critical, sometimes; we can seize iron from Earth Kingdom mines. It's a little harder to seize fish."

Silence, save for crackling flames.

"I considered sending assassins," Azula admitted. "But simply having the Avatar disappear on a moonless night, or even defeated in a town square... it wouldn't be enough. They have *Avatar impersonators* trying to get into Ba Sing Se, a hundred years after it was death to have those tattoos! It's madness. One small death won't stop it." She met her father's gaze, spine straight. "He has to die. In a way *no one* can raise rumors that he's ever coming back."

An elegant dark brow arched.

She would *not* sweat. "Unless there is information I'm not aware of, that has caused you to change your plan, Father?"

Another taut-nerved silence. For a breath, the flames lowered-

Azula caught the message cylinder half on reflex, face perfectly expressionless. Opened it, and read.

To her most esteemed highness, Azula, daughter of Ursa and Fire Lord Ozai, heir to the Dragon Throne-

Greetings, Granddaughter.

You will be well pleased to know that the strength of our people is not only in ships and bending, but the more subtle flame of resolve, even in those left behind. Byakko remains secure against the perils that lurk in the deeps of the Western Ocean, and we have taken measures to defend against the ancient threat of the North. Should Avatar Aang attempt what Avatar Kesuk nearly succeeded in, our Yu Yan stand ready, and our firebenders will rouse Mount Shirotona, no matter the cost.

Of course, we intend the matter to be solved with far less desperate measures. To that end we have taken further steps to make territory under our clan's control more productive, and bring more resources into the war. Which requires more people than Byakko alone can provide - but there are many left widows or widowers by the Avatar, cast adrift by grief in villages or cities that no longer hold beloved voices. We offer them a way to seek vengeance on our enemies, even as we light flames for the fallen.

As we have sought these survivors, their tales have come to our ears, to corroborate information we have gained from other sources. In brief - the current Avatar well knows what fuels a bender's power, and he has been witnessed probing deep into Avatar Kyoshi's history.

Given the wheel of the heavens that returns Sozin's Comet to us, along with other things, I fear I must impose on the blood between us, and remind you what an Avatar might do on the date in question. Our people will be vulnerable in the darkness; especially our civilians, who know too well what has happened in the past. It would be cruel to abandon them to such a fate - and foolish, when we know the Avatar has already forced Fire Sages into treason.

You are one of the few with the power and inner Fire to command an evacuation, should it be necessary. More important, you have the cunning and tenacity to plan such measures in a way that will prevent the Avatar and his forces from ever learning they have been anticipated - until it is too late.

Let this message find you swift of blade, mind, and fire,

Shidan of Byakko.

Oh - and tell your father that while disguising onmitsu as cabbage merchants may escape the Avatar's notice, our Home Guard is beginning to be bored enough to use the slower ones to troll for leopard-sharks. We have made efforts to curtail this behavior, as the cabbages often draw other creatures. There's only so many nutria-fish a sane man can eat.

...Azula was not going to giggle. No matter how much she wanted to. He remembered me!

And what a delightful dagger of a gift it was. Something to *do*. Something only she, or a very few other high-ranked nobles, would have the authority and power to do. The Fire Lord certainly couldn't show a lack of confidence in his plans by evacuating the caldera. But Mai was a governor's daughter, Ty Lee knew the common people, the Dai Li were experienced in arranging the actions of an entire population - she had the team to do this. And it needed to be done.

That Grandfather had just oh-so-sweetly tweaked the Fire Lord's nose was icing on the pastry.

He's sending those people to help Zuko. Who plans to be close enough to light memorial flames for the fleet.

A month ago, she wouldn't have thought that mattered. But after dealing with the Dai Li, and Makoto-

Well. Whether or not she wanted to believe in spirits, they clearly believed in *her*.

And spirits weren't living enemies. She could believe Zuko would fight them without mercy.

This is going to fit so well with my plans for General Fong.

After all, Fire Nation spies had confirmed that the Earth Kingdom general still had every intention of smacking that idiot airbender into the Avatar State and setting him loose on the Fire Lord like a tame waterspout. He'd tried it before, he would try it again.

Unless, of course, he was *distracted*.

And Zuko is excellent at distractions.

Her brother on his own might simply have made a strategic retreat, Air Temple or no Air Temple. Perched on top of a mountain with the Mechanist, Zuko and his men could make life difficult enough for General Fong that the fanatic might withdraw in disgust - and seek out the Avatar yet again.

Ah, but give Prince Zuko and General Iroh *civilians* to protect - Fire Nation citizens intent on building a colony, meaning they were a *stationary* target-

Fong will kill them, if he can. He's done it before.

And for all her uncle's peaceful ways, he would not stand aside and let civilians fall to Earth

Kingdom soldiers. He'd proven that, more than once.

The Dragon of the West still has teeth. He may not use them to attack... but we can still use him for the war.

"Byakko grows bold," her father observed. "They should remember they, too, are in the path of the eclipse."

"Of course they do," Azula said plainly. "That's why he framed it this way. For eight minutes Byakko is going to have to rely completely on everything they've done to calm Shirotona down *to that point*. And so are we." She shrugged, as if it were nothing to worry about. "We can't afford to take too much offense. Not until after the eclipse. And then - well. We'll either have dealt with the Avatar, or not. Either way, our people won't be enthused about turning too harsh measures on one of our own islands. Especially one that sent a warning to protect the common people."

"Dealt with him, or not?" her father echoed, dry as sand.

"Any plan can fail," Azula said candidly. "Too many people who should know better have acted to support the Avatar. Or *not* acted *against* him." She met her father's gaze through the flames, trying not to betray any twitch of her racing heart. "That's the problem with fighting air. Leave any opening, and it might squirm through."

Pale gold narrowed. "Air," he said archly, "is not my current concern. Daughter."

Don't flinch. Don't flinch, don't move-

"It has been decades since Lady Kotone first ordered her husband never to approach the capital," Ozai mused. "In all that time, that toothless old dragon has never - ever - come close to violating those orders." A slight, cruel smile. "Not even in the wake of Lord Kuzon's... tragic, untimely death. Byakko may have some few agents here, but Shidan never crosses the Caldera rim. Wise of him, in the wake of your mother's treachery." Hands fisted in the sleeves of his robe. "And now he calls *you* Granddaughter. Why?"

Breathe. You have to breathe! "Because he knew it would annoy you?" Azula managed, trying for an air of lazy disinterest. Trying not to think of what her father had revealed, in the choice of words, the calculated glitter of eyes. "Byakko may hate the Fire Lords, but they're just as much a part of the Fire Nation as anyone in the Caldera. The Earth Kingdom and the Water Tribes won't care who any of us are. They'd murder us all, if they could. Byakko knows that." She did smile, then; the calculated edge that sent wise courtiers fleeing. "So if they can't challenge you to an Agni Kai, of *course* they'll find... other methods to be annoying. What else should we expect?"

Silence, wreathed in the hiss of flames.

"...Sufficient. You may go."

Azula prostrated herself, and withdrew.

He's angry with me.

Well, of *course* he was, a more rational part of her mind pointed out as Azula made her way through elegant, tapestry-hung halls. She'd just received a friendly, *family* letter from the man who'd wanted Fire Lord Azulon's head on a pike. Who probably still wanted Fire Lord Ozai's there, outside of the *minor* detail that leaving the Fire Nation leaderless while an Avatar was running around loose wasn't just an invitation to disaster, it was escorting disaster in, serving it wine, and settling down for an unarmed family dinner.

No. Grandfather wasn't anywhere near that foolish. Yes, he hated the Fire Lord. She knew that. She'd *felt* it, in the quiet moment between sleeping and waking every dawn. A misty memory of the ship; a warmth of sharp-nailed hands, and a growl, as fire ate the scars from her lightning-ravaged heart.

You are cruel and scheming and ruthless, but you are my granddaughter.

She hadn't dared believe that feeling. That sense that Shidan of Byakko knew what she was, all of it; and if he wasn't happy with what he knew, he at least *saw* it.

Not the true heir, born too late. Not Mother's hopeless case. Just... me.

Acceptance. Acknowledgement of *who she was*. It had been too good to be true.

But... the letter.

Zuko couldn't do this. He'd never be able to manipulate enough nobles in time. Mother couldn't; she'd want to warn the whole city, and we can't, it would tip our hands far too soon.

No. What Shidan had offered her was a task that *needed* someone ruthless. Manipulative. Even cruel, if that was what it took to move the most lives out of the battlefield while keeping their trap intact.

He sees me. He really sees me.

...Why couldn't Mother have done that?

Points of pain stabbed her palms; Azula forced herself to relax clenched fists. It didn't matter now. It *didn't*.

What mattered were her plans, her nation, and her people. And making sure Ty Lee had some privacy to blast things when she finally read those scrolls on onmitsu. Especially the ones about Kuzon of Byakko.

I think I'd rather face the invasion.

After all, there would be *tears*. What on earth was she supposed to do about that? Killing things just didn't make Ty Lee feel better.

Definitely easier to face the invasion.

The eclipse would be tricky and dangerous and lethal to some of her people, but when you boiled it all down, it was an invasion planned by *barbarians*.

And what do Water Tribe raiders know about subtlety?

Step. Slice the air with gleaming black. Retreat and circle, shifting his stance to skirt Boots' soft rattle through the ash...

And all the time, keep an ear cocked to just over the blackened ridge, where Toph and Katara were watching Aang in his spirit-trance.

"You need to focus."

Even after the past few days - and especially nights - Sokka still almost jumped out of his skin at

the familiar whisper. "Could you not do that?" he hissed.

Pale as a reflection in water, Temul smirked at him. She didn't seem to be here, she didn't seem to be *solid* - but the past week had proven her blade still burned chill enough to tag him when he screwed up. "Your friends can look after themselves for a time. Focus on the kata."

Sokka took a deep breath, let it whistle out. "I can't." Dark dust rose around his feet as he waved at the wreckage of an island. "It's... it shouldn't*be* like this." And why he was so sure - he didn't want to think about it.

"No," Temul agreed. "A century is time enough for any volcano to grow green again." Her footsteps raised no dust; wind blowing past her was chill as night. "In the Earth Kingdom, the lord *is* the land. To a point. Among Fire, the lord is the *domain*. It's not the same. But there is... overlap." Pale gold searched the landscape, grim. "All the Fire Nation was Sozin's domain. And here... here he blackened his soul with the greatest betrayal. It scars the land, even to this day."

"Like the fire-scar, where he killed you," Sokka realized.

"Like it, yes," the ghost acknowledged. "But this was no mere dragon-child's death. This was an *Avatar's*."

"Roku died here." Sokka sheathed his sword, turning to run-

"He's in no danger."

Sokka shot her a skeptical look. Tried not to think of how much of the landscape he could see *through* her.

"You won't want him to stay long," Temul said dryly. "But a few hours will not risk much. *I* will not harm him. That, you know."

"Yeah, I know," Sokka admitted. Aang could walk right past her, and she wouldn't touch a hair on his head. She'd *had* her revenge.

Me.

He knew what a volcano should look like. Knew it down to his bones. He walked over ashy soil the same way he would have snow, knowing by look and shadows and the taste of the air what was safe, and what would suck you under like quicksand. He hadn't needed Toph's feet to know there was a village buried back there. And from the feel of the ashes, the kind you got only when the lava came thick and heavy and *fast*... he had a bad feeling about how many people *hadn't* gotten out.

"How did it happen?" Sokka threw up his hands. "Roku was an Avatar!"

Temul snorted. "Roku was a young fool of a firebender, plucked away at sixteen and told to master the rest of the elements. You don't set a *teenager* on volcano-watch! They don't know enough. They aren't *patient* enough. They don't *listen-with-heart-and-eyes-and-whiskers*."

Dragon-listening, she meant; and it hurt Sokka's brain that he *understood* that. A master firebender didn't just look for smoke and steam. He felt the fire in the rocks, the charge moving magma gave the air, the little flames of living things moving away from oncoming death.

"I know *one* cub that young I trusted with a volcano, and he had a dragon at his side," Temul went on, more quietly. "He'd been raised to the duty. He *knew* Shiroton, the way you know the icy

coasts. And if I'd been living, I'd still have held my breath for years, waiting for Byakko to fall." Her eyes grew distant. "I know two, now. But the prince has had hard years to beat the reckless out of him. He'll hold, if anyone can."

"You think *Zuko's* not *reckless*?" Sokka gave her a *look*. "Sometime, I've got to tell you about him, the North Pole, and turtle seals."

Temul gave him a toothy grin.

Oh no.

"Firebender," the ghost said succinctly. "Breath control."

"But," Sokka sputtered, "diving-"

"Think of the ama," Temul chuckled. "Marines are trained to swim in armor, Sokka. You know that." A chuckle. "Or ask him yourself, when next you meet."

"Right," Sokka muttered. "Like I'm in a real hurry to run back into a guy who cuts his nails with rocks-"

Oh. Oh, hell.

Pale gold eyes. Stone-cut nails. An utter, bone-deep fury when people's words didn't match their deeds.

Like Temul.

Dragon-child. He knew what it was. He *knew*, and wanted to wince down to his bones.

The guys you never let near airbenders, because the monks say a dozen things and never mean any of them. And when a dragon-child flips out, there's no way to tell the dragon that bison shouldn't be food. Kuzon would have known that... "Why did you go to the Western Temple?" Sokka blurted out. "You knew the nuns would be watching their bison to see if they could trust you, Aang does that all the *time*. And the bison know you smell like - that you're not..." He couldn't say it.

"Not human, child of Water?" Temul's laugh was a bittersweet rumble. "Ah, yes. We've heard *that* one before." A soft sigh. "Young one. There was no one else to go. Better to hear their insults - yes, and even their threats - and *try* to save lives. There is the hunt, and there is *slaughter*. No true dragon joys in slaughter." A shadowed shrug. "We may be good at it. We may glory that we live because our enemies are dead. But that is necessity, and the survival of the clan. It is not to be *sought*. I would no more have thirsted for the lives of those misguided, ignorant fools than you would."

But her words were shadows, not sounds; and when he listened, we wasn't *we*, and you wasn't *you*. *We was the children-of-Flame, Agni's own. And you was-*

Adopted-cub-of-my-clan. Sokka stiffened. "I'm *Water Tribe*."

"By which you mean, you are human," Temul said, half to herself. "Do you know what human is, Sokka?" A sharp-nailed hand gestured toward the scrolls in his pack. "More... do you know what it *was*?"

Almost against his will, Sokka took out the Painted Lady's message.

Seek the skilled swordsman, that he may set you on the path...

No. No, that was the *easy* translation. The one he might have read to Aang, weeks ago, if he'd been able to read High Court at all, before Temul had shoved the knowledge of a heir of Shu Jing into his head.

It was easy, and it was *wrong*.

Seek the skilled swordsman, that he may set those-who-guard-the-World-Spirit on the path. How will the World-Spirit-and-its-bearer end the war if the human-who-is-the-World-Spirit's-bearer knows not what ended the peace?

I speak this so that the human-who-bears-the-World-Spirit must learn to understand. To think, if only for a flutter of heartbeats, in the way of those the World-Spirit-and-its-bearer call alien. Outcast. Not-of-mine.

The children-of-Flame are not alien. The Father-of-Fire stretched his wing over Kingami's-wingless-heart-kin, to join them with the dragon-clans and the spirits-of-the-Fire-Isles, and the World-Spirit did not bid him nay. He chose we-who-bear-flame-and-sword-and-spirit, and he set no limits on that choice. For we-of-wingless-Fire were already change, and destruction, and building anew.

Then sickness scythed down the flameless-humans like grain, and the children-of-Flame cried out to Father-of-Fire. He nursed us, and we took fire's gift to heal those-flameless we could. But the children-of-Flame were too few.

Other powers roused then, curious; and roused the World-Spirit, that they might gather up those Fire did not shield. And the World-Spirit did not bid them nay.

But from them, the World-Spirit-you-bear took a price.

"Forget."

Forget power. Forget learning. Forget all rooted in knowledge that was not of this-world-and-no-other.

But the children-of-Flame were dragon-kin, Father-of-Fire's eyes and ears. The World-Spirit-and-its-bearer could not make us forget.

The children-of-Flame remember what the World-Spirit-and-its-bearer have stolen from us.

The children-of-Flame remember when a hundred years passed as a day.

The children-of-Flame remember what the World-Spirit-and-its-bearer wish humans to never have known.

The children-of-Flame know why Makoto would kill her own clan - all clans - to kill the human-who-is-the-World-Spirit's-bearer.

Will the human-who-bears-the-World-Spirit ask us?

Hands shaking, Sokka let the scroll roll closed. "It can't be true."

"Would it were not." A misty hand knuckled the side of his face, sharp nails carefully tucked away from skin; a chill gesture of comfort. "You see me as old, cub. But there was a time when all

humans - yes, even *Water Tribe* - lived as long as dragons." A dry chuckle. "It's why Fire ghosts are so stubborn. Part of us knows we shouldn't be dead."

Sokka scrunched his eyes shut, unwilling to look. "But it doesn't make sense. Why would the Avatar...?"

"Because we don't *fit*." Temul sighed. "In all this world, there are four creatures whose lives now outlast humankind. Dragons. Walking whales. Lion-turtles. And a pair of koi fish who are not fish at all."

Wait. What?

"Avatar..." Temul harrumphed. "What an *inaccurate* word. The *World-Spirit*, Sokka. It is born into human flesh, yes. But it is *not* human. You know well enough that while spirits may be cruel, or kind, or even selfless, they are *not* so for the same reasons as humans. Or even dragons."

Reluctantly, Sokka looked toward Boots' rattle.

He saved Toph's life.

It'd taken him a while to figure it out, between Shaman Tao being grumbly about bending smoke and Toph just flat-out not wanting to talk about the tentacled horror she couldn't see coming. But he'd put it together. The betobeto had tried to warn Toph. Tried to get her away from the water.

And when that hadn't worked... Boots had stayed. Even when a sea-spider could have squashed him like a bug.

"You like her because she's trouble," Sokka decided, eyeing the faint swirl of ashes above the sound of tapping toes. "Because she's loud and stubborn and she shakes the ground - and that scares people. Which is what you *live* to do. Aang thinks you're her friend, but - it's more of a partner in crime, isn't it?"

Happy stomping, like a crazy guy testing spring ice.

"Right," Sokka muttered. Eyed Temul. "You were alive when Roku was the Avatar. Why didn't you tell him?"

"There was much I did not learn until after my death," the ghost said bluntly. "As for human lives... I did try to tell Roku." She winced, and seemed to huddle on herself, shadow on shadow. "I've never seen any firebender age so fast."

"Wait, wait," Sokka held up empty hands, "that doesn't make sense. You keep old age from biting by moving your chi, and he was the *Avatar*..."

The human-who-is-the-World-Spirit's-bearer. One of thousands. One Avatar dies, and the next is born...

Dragon-children were *born* paranoid. That didn't mean they were wrong.

Sokka gulped. "You think it was killing him."

"Killing? Oh, no." Temul's voice dripped irony. "As your young airbender would say, it wasn't *killing* anyone. It simply... wasn't helping him not to die."

...And he could almost hear Aang saying it, too. Well, maybe not that *exactly* - Aang hated it when

things died, even if they were scrumptious lunches on legs, but... *Ouch*.

But the wince turned into a shudder, as the implications hit home. "Hold on. If you think Roku was dying because you tried to tell him the *truth*-" He stared at the scroll tucked into his pack. "That's a trap."

"Yes!" Pale gold gleamed, proud as Hakoda when he'd brought home his first fish. "Yes, cub. Of course it is! She is a spirit. Bound to that river, to these isles. And Avatar Aang comes to strike down the Fire Lord, the great name Kyoshi set above us all? Hate or love him, she *must* try to stop you!" Stiffness eased out of ancient shoulders, and Temul shook her head. "Bear her no ill will, Sokka. She tried to twist the blow awry, as much as she could. But remember where you *are*. Remember what you fight. The great names have power over all in their domains. And Ozai is the greatest name of all."

"You mean, everything here's trying to kill us," Sokka concluded.

"Almost everything," Temul agreed. "Be wary. Be *careful*."

Sokka nodded, thinking that through. "So how are you trying to kill him?"

Temul chuckled. "Ah, but have I do to with Avatar Aang?"

"Um." Sokka pointed a thumb toward himself.

"Yes?" A white gleam of teeth. "Why, here I train an heir of my clan. What a young hothead might choose to *do* with that training is his own choice." Her smile softened a little; iron, rather than steel. "I am a ghost, Sokka. I am not bound as a spirit is bound. You are my vengeance, and so I can protect you. To a point." She sighed, like cold wind through dead leaves. "But I cannot protect you from yourself. You claim that fool boy as your family, and he is *not*. He cannot be. The airbender is what he is, and that will never change. You pour your heart into him like water... Sokka. There is nothing in him that can give it *back*."

"Yeah," Sokka admitted, almost a whisper. "I know."

Cold sparks burned about white wisps of hair. "You *know*?"

"I'm Water Tribe," Sokka shrugged, almost tempted to laugh. It wasn't funny. Except it *was*, in a way that would have had Katara checking him for a fever and Toph getting rocks to throw. "I'm not going to lose it if he lies to me. And I'm not going to die." He glanced away. "He's Aang. He's a fun kid. And he tries to do what's right. Maybe Kuzon needed more than that. Maybe he should have *gotten* it. But me? I'm good. I'm not a bender, Temul. I'll be fine, okay?" He ran that back through his head, and smacked himself in the forehead. "I'm telling the ghost that *kidnapped me* into her clan not to worry. When did my life get this weird?"

"You've more sense than most, but you're a cub still. I *will* worry," Temul said frankly. "You love fire when it warms, and hate it when it burns. But it is still fire." The ghost shook her head. "He-who-bears-the-World-Spirit may be your friend. But never think that the *World-Spirit* is. You and I? One life, against all that lives - and does *not* live - in the world? No. We are only flickers of flame, that spark and die."

Fire is life.

...And that was just a whole weevil-rat's nest of implications he did *not* want to think about. Not now. Not when the way Temul's shade was flickering meant she was about to leave, and there was something he had to know. "Temul." Sokka nerved himself, and reached for the formal words.

"Elder. What's a walking whale?"

Chapter End Notes

In Real Life, nutria are a very annoying species of aquatic rodent that's escaped into the Louisiana marshes; they are a major force in destroying those wetlands. Sea-silk is also real, made by pinna molluscs, warm, strong, and golden when treated with citrus juice.

Kryal shares credit on the water-silk-making water spiders. That was fun to come up with.

Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Fangs gleamed in lantern-light, dark as old ivory, each one longer than Zuko's head. Massive claws rested on stone, poised to leap and rend and tear. The tail stretched long and long, ready to beat waves to a bloody froth.

Throat dry, Zuko stepped out of the skeleton's line of sight. "What. The. *Hell?*"

"*Rakko-wani.*" Fearless, Langxue stepped up to touch the ankle bone of something that would have been able to swallow him in one gulp. "That's what you called them, a thousand years ago. The otter-crocodiles. The walking whales." His face clouded. "The Water Tribes have a name for them, too. *Kadzait.*"

The sea-wolves. Zuko had heard that name before, he knew it-

Not me. Kuzon.

He took another step back and sideways, careful not to jar up against another glass case of... well, he wasn't really worried about that right now. The ancient White Lotus cache Langxue had led them to was stuffed with weirdness. Scrolls, odd rocks, who knew what. But none of it was as impressive as what coiled against the vault's rear wall. *Fifty feet if it's an inch. Give it muscle to match, and- Agni. Wani would've been metal splinters.* "I've sailed out there for three years. No one I've *ever* met has said anything about something like this!"

"What, the big bad Fire Prince never heard about sea serpents?" Saoluan quipped.

Zuko resisted the urge to roll his eyes. The Kyoshi Warrior might act utterly nonchalant, but she'd been careful to always keep something between her and those teeth.

I can't blame her. I wish I could go curl up and hide. And he was so, so glad Shirong was waiting up and outside, ready to bend them out if something went wrong. He did *not* want to be trapped in here if the ceiling came down. An ancient vault, one that'd been old when *Hyourin* had been here... who knew how stable it was?

And if there was a skeleton, that creature had been alive. If it had been alive, it had a spirit. And spirits might linger.

We've already seen the dead walk.

"The sea serpents were evil. Cast out," Amaya said softly, almost reaching to touch the bones. She hesitated, and dropped her hand back to her side. "But we wronged those who were not evil, and Avatar Kesuk ordered the kadzait to leave us, never to be tainted by humans again."

By her side, Iroh took her hand, and let her lean into him.

"That's not exactly what happened." Langxue stepped away from the skeleton, face still haunted. "I read what the White Lotus found out the last time I was here."

"You mean, when Hyourin was here," Saoluan said firmly.

"Heh. Yeah."

Something about the way Langxue said that prickled hairs on Zuko's neck. Almost without thinking, he took a shallow, open-mouthed breath, calculated to bring in any scent of violence.

Nothing. Just dust and old bones, still with a faint tang of the sea.

"Sea serpents, kadzait - they're all the same people," Langxue went on. "Like dragons." The green gaze bored into Zuko's. "A *lot* like dragons."

But the stories say sea serpents hunt ships down and destroy them... of course. "Dark dragons," Zuko realized. "The sea serpents are like dark dragons."

"Yeah. Sometimes dragons are born with too much fire and no water. And sometimes... kadzait are born without fire," Langxue said soberly. "I don't know why it happens to our spirit-beasts, and not Earth and Air. Maybe because bison have to land, and badger-moles have to come up for air. But it happens. The kadzait drive serpents off when they figure it out, but before that - they can do a lot of damage. And after that, if they survive out there in the oceans. Some of them did. They got to be huge. Like this one."

"Without fire, there is no honor. No trust." Amaya watched lantern-shadows flicker in empty eye-sockets. "A creature that can only care about its family, and no others. Which means the rest of the tribe can never matter. And that means..." She shuddered.

"Like every gruesome story the Fire Nation tells their kids about Water Tribe raiders," Langxue agreed. "Gets worse than that. Dark dragons... fire-spirits don't usually get to stick around long enough to go bad. Sea serpents? A haima-jiao can move right in." He jerked his head toward the skeleton. "Why do you think it's up here, not buried in the ocean?"

Oh, wonderful, Zuko thought sourly. No wonder his first impulse was to burn white bone to ash before it could jump him. It just might.

"Would it not be safer to invoke cleansing fire by a cremation, then?" Iroh eyed the skeleton as if calculating the necessary coal down to the last lump. "And then commit the remains to the sea."

"Probably," Langxue allowed. "But records say the yāorén back then wanted to be sure those who came later would know what to look for. And they didn't want to keep an honorable soul from decent burial. As long as there's no running water up here, it's safe."

As long as, Zuko thought darkly. *Great. Better check with Shirong to make sure this place is watertight.* "Couldn't they just use a scroll painting?"

"Heh." Langxue shook his head. "You can't get *this creature feels wrong* off a scroll painting. From bones, you can." He shrugged. "This place was part of training yāorén to help the Avatar. It's not supposed to be *safe*."

Zuko made an effort not to snarl. *I'll help Aang when he deserves it. Not before.* If he'd put together Langxue's stories right, all the last yāorén had *died* trying to help an Avatar. Leaving nobody behind to make sure anyone else the spirits tagged got trained.

Which means all the same mistakes get made twice. Which is why I'm in this mess. And the whole world is. I am not letting that happen again.

Langxue eyed the bones, a bitter curl to his lips. "It was a sea serpent that went after Avatar Kesuk's animal guide, all those centuries ago. Maybe it was a male trying to sneak in and breed.

Maybe it just wanted to kill things. We don't know. But it killed the creature that kept Kesuk grounded and human. And she just - lost it. Called up the Avatar State. Destroyed *everything* around the Air Isles... right, the maps are different, part of them are in the Fire Nation now. Fire and storm and earthquakes. Right through the breeding pods."

Amaya blanched. "But she was an *Avatar*. She *couldn't* have-"

Langxue winced. "The *Avatar Spirit* doesn't care about people. The *human* might. If she cares about anything. Read the records; Kesuk was a pile of spite wrapped up in silk and mirrors. And when an Avatar's angry, when something's threatening them... that poor bastard is threatening the spirit of the whole world. They've got to die." He shrugged, weary. "The animal guide usually drags them back after a few minutes. Without hers..."

Zuko tried not to shiver. He'd seen enough of Aang losing it for imagination to fill in the horrifying blanks. *Long Feng was an idiot.*

Too bad the Dai Li leader wasn't the only one.

I grabbed Aang without Appa, and he came that close to drowning us all. If Sokka hadn't shown up on bison-back... damn. I owe him one. I hate owing people.

Not that he had any intention of ever telling Sokka about that debt. He'd helped the Water Tribe put Aang back together, and he was helping the Mechanist stay out of the Fire Lord's grip. That ought to be enough for anybody.

Iroh cleared his throat. "I was under the impression that Avatar Kesuk died *here*."

"She did," Langxue said grimly. "The White Lotus got her in place, and Asagitatsu blew. That's... one of the last times this place got buried."

"And how, precisely, did our order lure a mad Avatar from the very shores of the Fire Nation across the ocean?" Iroh's gray brow arched, waiting for any possible explanation of a miracle.

"Dragons," Zuko shrugged, trying to keep his tone even. That *lost* look in Langxue's eyes...

I don't know how old Hyourin was, but - he had to be older than Langxue is. Kuzon's memories scare me, and he only died eighteen years ago. Hyourin was eleven centuries ago. How do you handle somebody who was dead and dust before your grandfather's grandfather was born?

"It had to be dragons," Zuko went on, trying not to imagine what had to have been a storm-wracked, desperate flight. "Nothing else could move fast enough. Grandfather said Asagitatsu and Shirotona's clans used to be allies. Of course they'd help."

"Half right." Langxue leaned toward the bones again; shook himself, and moved away. "The records say it was a relay. The dragons had the killer instinct to keep Kesuk going after them instead of people. Anybody with bison went in to catch the ones too exhausted to keep it up..." A shiver. "Between the wind and the lightning, most of those who got tired... didn't have a chance to get clear."

"Then why take the risk?" Iroh gave him a considering look. "The Avatar State passes; we have seen that when Aang is enraged, no matter where Appa may be. Had they waited, she would have calmed again."

For a moment, Langxue gaped at him. "Aang can come out of it without Appa."

"Yes, so his young friends have recounted-"

"He can *come out of it* without *Appa*." Langxue made a strangled sound. "That? Is one *tough* kid."

Zuko tried to connect *Aang* and *tough kid*. It made his head hurt.

"But even if Kesuk had been that tough - and from the records, she *wasn't* - she *killed* the Moon's *children*," Langxue bit out. "She wasn't going to come out of it, General. She was a lousy excuse for a human being before she lost it, and - damn it, you don't know." He waved a fist toward one of the stuffed scroll-racks. "Kesuk thought she ought to rule the world, and the Northern Tribe was set to back her. That's why she was there. She knew the dragons wouldn't want to fight while the pods were calving. The boats were going to ride with the kadzait, right up the rivers..." He stopped at the horror on Amaya's face. "I'm sorry. The scrolls say some yāorén from the Earth Kingdom wanted to calm Kesuk down. To see if she could be healed. But after she tore apart the pods, and the islands - everyone else wanted her *dead*. And there was only one way to be sure."

"Why?" the healer managed. "What makes this place have such horrid power?"

Langxue blew out a breath. "You're a healer. Why can't you strangle yourself with your bare hands?"

"If you were foolish enough to try, you'd pass out." Amaya narrowed her eyes at his nod. "That's not an answer, young man."

"I believe it may be," Iroh mused, touching her shoulder. "The core of the world is fire, and sometimes it twists and rages, shaking the very earth. Volcanoes happen where the fire has raged enough to eat away earth's armor, spilling fiery rock into water and air. Thus the flames are cooled, and the earth's temper soothed." He spread his hands. "If the world itself has decided earth and fire must rage, then if the Avatar, who carries the *spirit* of the world, bids it stop - well."

"Strangling yourself," Zuko muttered. "It doesn't work."

...And now Amaya's gaze was on him, a thin-lipped scowl of *we're going to talk about how you know that, young man*.

"We found that out the hard way, when Yangchen fought the White Wind." Langxue hugged himself, shuddering at the memory. "Asagitatsu wouldn't listen to someone who wasn't her blood, and when we tried to tell her we were helping the Avatar, she got even madder, and-" He looked away.

"This time, she said we could try," Zuko said firmly. Swept a glance over everyone there, and caught Saoulun's frown. "You don't think so?"

"Huh? Oh!" The warrior smiled. "No, I believe her. Kind of hard not to. I was just wondering... well, it's kind of silly."

Langxue seemed to perk up a little, if only so he could frown at her. "What?"

Saoulun shrugged, armor rustling. "The Water Tribes are at the poles, right? Except for oddballs like our people on Kyoshi Island. So... why were *Water* spirit-animals coming to the *Fire* Nation to calve?"

"A lot of whales do that," Zuko told her. He nodded toward the skeleton. "Those aren't whales, I've never seen anything like that, but they must be close. I've been on some whalers." Only outside Fire Nation waters, ironically. But he'd read how it worked at home. "The sages think it's because

the calves don't have enough blubber. If they were born near the poles, they'd freeze."

"Heh!" Langxue looked almost gleeful. Smirked at Amaya, just a little. "You want to tell them?"

"I think I do." Blue eyes lit with humor, as she poked Iroh in the shoulder. "Your sages don't know everything."

"Do they not?" Iroh looked fascinated, even as he did *not* look at the nephew sputtering in indignation. "I admit, despite the past three years, I know less of the sea than most. There is always another mystery. Why do whales swim to our islands, then?"

"Why do ostrich-horses move out of the valleys onto the plains, before winter has fully past?" Amaya said pointedly. "Because they are hunted."

Zuko took another look at massive, tearing jaws. And tried not to blanch. "They were following their prey."

"Fire and water have more in common than I would ever have guessed," Amaya mused. "We both have hunters as our kin. Dragons as your blood, and the kadzait as our spirits." She gave Iroh a wry look. "Though when *we* have legends of shape-shifters, it's the human who goes to the sea. Not the other way around."

Zuko blinked, and traded a glance with Saoluan that bordered on *eww*, with a healthy serving of *I don't even want to think about how that works*.

"Oh, don't look like that," Langxue grumbled. "People meant to go to the sea are pretty obvious. They don't cry when they're born, and- what?"

Drawing in a sharp breath, Iroh let it sigh out with just a shimmer of heat. "I have a tale to tell you, about Chief Arnook's daughter." He grimaced. "It will not be easy hearing."

Yue. Suddenly, Zuko didn't care about the skeleton. *Agni, I wish I were anywhere else*.

At least he had a legitimate excuse not to listen to the murmurs, shutting his ears to Uncle's recounting of the North Pole as he poked around the scrolls and artifacts the White Lotus had hidden in the lee of a volcano's wrath. *I don't care if this is supposed to be some secret order. It's in my domain, and I want to know just what the heck has been going on here. Avatar Kesuk snapped and went on a killing spree? Agni, what else don't we know about the whole mess?*

Professor Wen, Zuko decided, weaving through bookcases to poke into one of the farther corners. *That's who I'll get down here. Uncle likes him, and we can both trust him. If there is something in here that has to stay secret, he can referee. Heck, he's an earthbender; if he's gotten anywhere near here, he's probably bouncing up and down waiting to do an... excavation...*

Stained white. Rounded and long shapes, brittle as desert wood. Familiar shapes.

Zuko stared at shreds of cloth wrapping dry bones - so *many* bones - and tried not to swear.

"What?" Saoluan was moving his way, hand dipping toward her sword.

"Don't come over here!"

Amaya almost stepped toward him anyway; Iroh put a hand on her arm. "What is it you have found, nephew?"

"You said, the last time you were here." Zuko backed out of the corner, worked his way back into plain view of the others. "Hyourin never left."

Langxue flinched. Saoluan looked ready to commit murder, if she could just figure out whose head to slice off.

"There wasn't anyone else left, and... we knew we wouldn't last long enough to send a message," Langxue said, barely above a whisper. "Nobody does. Not with burned lungs." He shook his head. "The vault was going to be buried. Lava, wind-blown ashes, the Face-stealer - it was going to be forgotten. And we needed it. We needed it so much." Hands almost reached out; dropped limply back to his sides. "Funny thing about yāorén coming back. We can feel where we died. In any life. You could probably find the exact spot Kuzon died. All you have to do is follow the pain."

Iroh inhaled sharply. "Hyourin and his companions left themselves as markers. So a yāorén might be reborn, and find what must be restored." His gaze bored into sea-green. "What is here, Langxue? What must we know, that has been forgotten?"

"Who Koh is. Why he hates us so much." Langxue was backed all the way against Saoluan, eyes dark in a way Zuko didn't like at all. "The first thing the world needed after life was death. The Face-stealer... he's the Avatar Spirit's *child*."

Zuko thought of that, and Azula, and everything desperate he'd ever done for Ozai's love. "We are so *screwed*."

"Zuko," Iroh frowned. "Allowing Lieutenant Teruko's men to watch over you does not include using such language-"

"Oh, I haven't even gotten started," Zuko snarled. "Uncle, you - Grandfather *loved* you. You *don't get it*. The Face-stealer's the Avatar Spirit's *firstborn*. And what did the world-spirit do? *Abandoned* him. For *humans*." Knuckles clenched, white; he breathed slow, denying the need to spark. "And then? We *killed* it."

"Temporarily," Iroh protested; for once, pale himself. "To protect ourselves, and the world's own creatures."

Zuko snorted, anger the only thing keeping him from running screaming. If someone had killed Ozai, while he was still tangled up in trying to get his father's love back... before he'd realized he'd never had it in the first place... *I'd have killed them. I'd have done so much worse than killing them.* "You think the Face-stealer *cares*?"

"Not a chance." Langxue shivered. "It really hurts in here."

His lost tone snapped Amaya's attention to him; the healer mouthed a vicious word before steering them both toward the vault's entrance. "Shock. Get him out of here. Away from all this *earth*."

Sunlight's good.

Spreading his hands, palm up, Zuko tried to catch as much of it as he could. He'd walked among the dead before. It never got easier.

A hint of shadow passed near; he heard cloth barely whisper, as Shirong settled on a warm rock near him. "They don't seem to have left ghosts. Though I wouldn't swear about that - kadzait, did they call it?"

Zuko shuddered. "We need to see them buried with honor."

"I'll ask Langxue about that," the agent said thoughtfully. "If they're all yāorén - who knows what's appropriate."

Good point. But not the first worry on his mind. "I want this kept quiet from Hakoda's men," Zuko said abruptly. "And the Temple."

"It won't be easy to hide that we have an interest here," Shirong mused. "But unless they land, they won't know what." He cleared his throat. "Might I ask why?"

"They're not telling us everything."

Shirong snorted. "You're not that petty."

Want to bet? Right now he felt all *kinds* of petty. And angry. And confused.

But Shirong was right. He had reasons. He just had to sort them out.

Think. What's in there is proof that... right. Taking a deep breath, Zuko tried to put it in logical order. "Chief Hakoda found out the hard way that a waterbender can pull on people's hearts. Even set people up to kill each other. Aang *is* a waterbender. And the Avatar." Zuko glanced back at the hole that led to the vault. "And in there are records Langxue says prove a Water Avatar went insane."

"Ah."

"Aang is an *idiot*," Zuko grumbled. "He doesn't think. He doesn't listen. He jumps on the first thing that seems like an answer, and counts on his friends to fix things if he's wrong. But he's not *crazy*."

"And you think Chief Hakoda might jump to conclusions," Shirong said neutrally.

"I think that if he finds out that over two thousand years ago, Air and Fire got together and killed a Water Tribe Avatar..." Zuko waved over the ridge toward Dragons' Wings, and up toward the Temple. "Things could get *tense*."

Shirong laughed. "We're living in a volcano, helping to feed people who still might drop bombs on us, and sooner or later the Fire Lord's going to throw troops our way. And you're worried about Chief Hakoda?"

"He's Sokka's dad," Zuko said practically. "Trust me. If anybody could find a way to wreck every plan we're trying to pull off, he could."

"And he won't take being lied to worse?" Shirong arched a brow.

"We're not going to lie," Zuko said firmly. "We're just not going to tell them everything."

"They burned the bones, then scattered the ashes in the water?" The Earth shaman leaned into the wind sweeping the Temple courtyard, frowning. "Are you sure?"

Wheeling back out to the landing yard to look for some test gear he'd dropped, Teo stopped, and stuck to the shadows. Chief Hakoda had brought Shaman Tao up here, and Dad liked Hakoda. Teo liked him, and not just because he was Sokka's dad.

But Tao, and the ship he and the other Water Tribe men had brought for Dad to break up for the steel...

Well. Auntie Changchang said that was making things a little *tense*.

And it was a funny thing about a lot of grownups from outside the Temple. They seemed to think if your legs didn't work, your ears didn't either.

"They said they found some half-buried remains, they weren't sure anyone else had done the job right, and they wanted to be sure." The Water Tribe chief looked warily over the edge and down. "If the stories they're telling down there are true, I can't blame them. But it seemed a little... odd."

"Odder than cremation followed by sea burial?" Tao said dryly.

"Respect." Hakoda thumped a fist into a palm. "You don't see the Fire Nation give that to barbarians. You should see the *polite request* they gave Bato this morning for me. They want the ship's name and honors."

"Of *course* they do." The weathered shaman thumped his staff on the courtyard flagstones, pacing absently. "You may as well give it to them, Chief Hakoda. One scrap of iron and a few scrolls? I can understand wanting to singe the chin of Fire Lord Ozai's son, but it's not worth the trouble you'd find keeping them. They mark a Fire Nation vessel - and the Ocean is very angry at the Fire Nation. Better to have that anger turned where it belongs." A weathered finger snapped out. "You there, young man. Either be about your business, or come out and join our talk like a man."

Busted. Teo wheeled himself out of the wall's shadows, eyeing them both warily. Chief Hakoda wasn't like anyone from the Temple, but he *was* like Sokka. He was okay.

Shaman Tao, though... the tall old earthbender was *spooky*.

"You were eavesdropping on us?" Hakoda frowned, though it didn't look that angry. "Why?"

Oh heck, try the truth. Sokka was okay with that. "You're asking my dad to build stuff for you," Tao answered, trying to keep his voice steady. Up in the air, he could fly rings around both of them. Down on stone, with an earthbender? This could go *so* wrong. "The last people who did that were the Fire Nation."

Hakoda straightened. "Sokka, Katara, and Aang helped you fight the Fire Nation."

"I *know*." Teo tried not to grip a wheel too obviously. "But you didn't see my dad's face when he told us the truth. You didn't have to know he'd been lying to you *all this time*. He was building weapons for the Fire Nation. And he hated it. He doesn't want to do this anymore!"

"You can't have tender feelings in the middle of a war, young man," the shaman began.

"Yes, he can," Hakoda said firmly. Looked Teo in the eye, managing to find that spot adults almost never did, where he was looking *at* the kid in the chair, not *down*. "I'm sorry. If I'd known that before I came here..." He sighed. "I still would have asked. My tribe is being wiped out, Teo. Katara's the last waterbender we have. My men haven't seen their families in two years. We've been fighting the Fire Lord, and we've been losing. Avatar Aang, this plan, is our best chance. If we don't beat Ozai now... there won't be another time."

"I know," Teo repeated, throat tight. "But what about after? If you win, are you going to leave him alone? Or..." He couldn't say it. He didn't even want to think it.

"Oh." Hakoda glanced aside, startled. Shook his head. "Spirits, Teo, how long have you been carrying that worry? If we win, we're going home. It's all we've ever wanted."

"So... when will we know if you win?" Teo asked. Because winning here had seemed simple. Drive the Fire Nation off, keep control of the air. And for months, it was that simple.

As winter got into spring, and the larders kept getting emptier... it wasn't simple anymore.

"They're offering to trade fish for some of our spices," Auntie Changchang had said. "And other things later, once they get crops in." The elderly matron had looked over the Temple's assembled parents, and nodded. "I think we should give them a chance."

Give them a chance, Teo thought now. *They're Fire Nation. The Fire Lord's brother, Dad says. And his son.*

Sure, the adults seemed to think that was the Earth King's seal on the treaty map. And the people down there hadn't asked for weapons. Yet. But they were who they were.

If he was lucky, Sokka and Katara had already showed the Temple who the Water Tribe was.

"We'll win when the Fire Nation stops fighting," Hakoda said, certain. "Just as you did here."

Teo blinked. It was just for a second, but he'd thought the shaman looked sad. Why?

"A fully trained Avatar should be enough to make any resistance crumble, after the Fire Lord is gone," Tao said. "The difficulty, of course, being the *fully trained* aspect. Have you any idea where we can find a trustworthy firebender to teach the Avatar?"

Hakoda pointed down.

Tao arched an eyebrow, deadpan. "You are joking, of course."

"They say they're not the enemy." Hakoda's eyes glinted. "Let them prove it."

"We are *not* going to train the Avatar on an *active volcano*, Chief Hakoda." Tao's staff tapped stone, emphasizing the words. "Particularly not one whose spirit recognizes *Ozai's son* as overlord. Avatar he may be, but until Aang masters all the elements, he is vulnerable. *Especially* to fire."

"The spirit?" Teo put in, hoping to head off what looked like the threat of a stare-down. "You mean the dragon in the cone?"

The shaman's attention snapped to him. "You saw it?"

"Everybody in the air saw it," Teo admitted. "There were people running around, and red armor coming up out of the water... and then she was just *there*, in the mist. And some of the red armor just - vanished in the flames. Like it was never even there." He frowned at the shaman. "Langxue and Saoluan said... man, it sounds crazy. They said they were attacked by *drowned bodies*. From the North Pole invasion. That's crazy, right? Sure, Auntie Changchang tells us scary stories about the dead who come back to kill people... but those are just *stories*." Scraping up a smile, he waited.

Tao was silent.

Teo swallowed dryly. "They... *are* just stories. Right?"

"No," the shaman said at last. "No, they are not." He gave the chief a wry shrug. "Which is why you should turn over the battle honors to those who've asked for them. I've worked enough protective rituals while I was on board to keep the drowned at bay, but once the Mechanist starts plundering the hull, those protections will be less effective. Better to let the Face-stealer's servants

find Prince Zuko's people, rather than yours."

Hakoda drew in a sharp breath. "You said the *Ocean's* rage. Not *that*."

"And what would you expect the Ocean to ally with, when evil must be repaid with evil?" Tao said sharply. "They meant to destroy not only the Northern Tribe, but a Great Spirit! All the lives and souls of that fleet are forfeit." He winced. "Yet though that may be just, with such power at his command, the Face-stealer may take the chance to use the drowned against innocents as well. As he is already using the darkness wrought in the North to rouse spirits against all living humans. We *must* defeat the Fire Lord. And it must be the Avatar who does so. He can bridge the gap between our world and the spirits', and bring the Ocean proof his vengeance is complete. Only then will Koh be weakened, and restrained from injuring humankind."

"My children aren't about to let Aang face Ozai alone," Hakoda said pointedly.

"They should reconsider that." Tao held up a hand before Hakoda could protest. "I said they *should*. I understand what it is to be young, and see your friends in danger. It would be better if Aang acted alone. But if the spirits truly object to a young boy having help to face his mortal enemy... well. I fear they'll find a way to arrange matters to their liking."

Teo felt a little queasy. If the spirits really were out there, they wouldn't do that to Aang. He was one of the good guys.

They're not going to do that. We're going to help. And we're going to win. "So," Teo grinned, "are we really going to be making giant fish?"

Chapter End Notes

Kadzait - wandering wolves.

For an image, look for this: Ambulocetus

Though a kadzait is bigger. A lot bigger.

Chapter 58

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Blah blah Avatar blah blah destiny to restore the balance blah blah Roku says Gyatso's got a message for me if I just stay on the right path, blahty, blahty, blah!" Toph finished off a good bad-day-at-the-Earth-Rumble style rant with three measured steps and one *punch*.

One inconvenient inn-garden-blocking boulder, now gravel. Toph grumbled a bit more under her breath, scooping up pebbles with a wave of her hand to crush into sand. Maybe this would sweeten up Katara long enough to pry her away from Hama for a while. Just to talk. Because there was *something wrong* here.

"Water's all about family," Toph muttered to herself, toes gripping good, honest dirt. "So how come Miss Last Southern Waterbender isn't with *hers*?"

Funny, how speaking the words out loud made the day seem a little colder.

Why isn't Hama with her family?

Sure, it must have been tough just getting out of the Fire Lord's grip to start with. And travel wasn't cheap. And if you didn't really want to risk a boat ride past the blockade - well, Amaya had gotten along fine in Ba Sing Se, so waterbenders *could* make it without their tribe.

But Amaya was a waterbender right out in the open, where everybody could see. She fixed people, and guys like Huojin called her Aunt, and maybe that was close enough to family. Hama? She lived in this inn *alone*. And no one knew she was a bender.

It was such a *little* thing. Silly. Aang would tell her she was just jumpy from all those ghost stories the other night. Heck, he'd probably be right.

But it *bothered* her.

Pebbles rattled.

"You don't like it either, huh?" Toph rubbed the air where Boots kind of was-and-wasn't. "Aang likes it better when you're not around much. Me? Makes me worried."

Quiet, measured taps.

"You don't know what's up either." Toph blew out a breath, letting her lips wiggle past each other. "Sokka's not worried, or he wouldn't be poking around for spirits with Aang, but-"

Footsteps, pacing down the road into town. Still around a thick corner of forest, but it was time to stop talking to thin air and brush up on her looking like a Fire Nation kid skills. 'Cause if she was reading those steps right - light, determined, with a balanced shift and root almost as solid as an earthbender-

Firebender, Toph concluded. Then almost - *almost* - thought better of it, feeling the slight difference between left and right strides. *Drag on his left, he's used to it - a firebender carrying swords?*

"Hello, the inn," the swordsman called out; voice gruff and no-nonsense, which was cool, but with a smirk of *I control the world* that made Toph want to stick her tongue out on general principles.

"The inn-lady's out. I'm *all alone*." Toph made her voice quaver, just like she would for her family's guards. "You sound like a nice man. Could you help me?" *Just come a little closer. You'll never know what hit you.*

Steady footsteps stopped. For a moment, she only felt his unhurried breathing. Then...

A low, rolling laugh.

Oh no. You do not laugh at me!

"I have it on the authority of my wife, my children, and my father-in-law that I do *not* sound like a nice man," the swordsman chuckled. "I sound like what I am; a cranky old dragon of a firebender, who sticks his whiskers into anything curious, and gets singed for his trouble." He gave her a formal, silk-whispering bow. "And anyone who has tamed a betobeto into civilized behavior is never alone. I am glad my grandson's gift of trouble to you has turned out so well, Lady Bei Fong."

Uh-oh...

"Forgive my forwardness, but those who might introduce us are oceans away. Or in my granddaughter's service. While those might be pleasant young ladies under other circumstances, their presence here and now would be awkward," the swordsman said dryly. "I am Shidan of Byakko. And it is very good to see you well. My grandson had faith you would have thrashed your enemies soundly, but the Earth Army on that beach might still have done something *stupid*."

Slow heartbeat. Steady, familiar kind of stance. A firebender carrying *swords*.

Toph didn't remember crossing the ground between them. Just reaching up with both hands and *yanking*.

Yep. Whiskers.

"Where's Sparky?"

"Ah." A wince of rueful laughter in that voice. "Stubborn, quick on your feet, and you take advantage of your opponent's openings. Well done. But please, cub, *not* the whiskers." He rested a warm hand on her head. "Zuko is alive and well, Toph. I would know if he were not. He has stuck his hand into more than one flutter-hornet's nest, but he is well."

"Are you sure?" Toph got out, throat tight. "Really, really sure? Because we met this shaman and he said people who even *look* like they're bending something they shouldn't can get into all *kinds* of trouble." *Dying. Zuko could be dying. And there's nothing I can do here about it!*

"Yāorén are shoved back into life wounded in spirit. Yes. I know." Shidan rumbled a breath. "He was fortunate; he found a spirit-healer. And now that gift is awake in the world once more. Other spirits may have meant him to be used and cast aside, but my grandson is stronger than that." Carefully, he untangled her fingers from his whiskers. "I will send him a letter when I can. He misses you, too."

"You're Shidan." Hand touching his, Toph felt a hard sharpness that wasn't anything like fingernails. "Are you *Kuzon's* Shidan?"

Long, slow breaths; Toph felt the air around them warm. "That frightens many," the dragon said at

last. "Does it frighten you?"

"Me? Scared of Sparky? Not happening," Toph shot back. "I just - I dunno, maybe you don't want to tell Aang what you are. But I kind of think he'd do better if he knew not everybody was gone-" Oh. Oh, *stupid*. Sure, Shidan had been Kuzon's friend. But he was a lord of a domain now, and outside of guys like Piandao who inherited from a *ghost*, all the great names were loyal to the Fire Lord-

"Toph. Cub!" Strong hands gripped her shoulders before she could bend him up to his chin in dirt. "I am no danger to you. Not to you, and not to Aang. Kotone holds Byakko, not I. Yes, were your friends to venture into her reach, she would be hard-pressed to avoid Ozai's orders to seize and destroy them. But *I* am not loyal to Ozai. Should fate so fall in my favor that I may do him a mischief... believe me, I will not hesitate." He crouched, resting his forehead against hers. "I will not harm Aang, and I will not lead him into harm. I am angry with him; his choices have harmed me and mine, though not all of that is his fault. But I have had many years to practice being human. I can be angry, without incinerating an idiot on the spot."

"Puts you one up on a lot of firebenders," Toph quipped. Even the guy's head was warm. Weird. "So if you're not after Aang, what are you doing here? I've been listening to Sokka read the map. Byakko's way away from here."

"It is," Shidan agreed. "But one of Byakko was here, almost a month ago. Hitomi. A merchant."

There'd been just a little hesitation before he said *merchant*. Which, Toph was guessing, meant she was something else, too.

"Her weekly letters failed to arrive. This is one of the last towns we know for certain that she visited," Shidan went on. "And since I need to touch several ports on business of my clan, I decided it would be best if I searched this town, instead of others. In case the rumors are true."

"Evil spirit-type rumors?" Toph said pointedly. "What kind of business?"

"To the first, yes," Shidan agreed. "To the second - I believe you would be more comfortable not knowing."

"I'm not helping Aang to be *comfortable*," Toph poked a finger his way. "If you're doing stuff to help the Fire Nation fight, Aang's got to-"

"I am seeking the widows and orphans of the Invasion of the North."

That quick, the solid ground of *I've got a deal with Aang* went all wobbly. *Earth Rumble*, Toph told herself. *Bluster it out*. "Yeah?"

"If the Avatar were to attack the Fire Nation directly, which the Fire Lord has *always* threatened he will, the children of the dead would be driven to revenge against their parents' slayer," Shidan said clinically. "It would be their duty and their honor... unless their great name, or the ghosts themselves, demand otherwise. And the Fire Lord will not." His voice dropped. "Thousands of them, Toph. Men, women, and children. All of them wishing nothing more than to face Aang, and slit his throat with a naked blade."

Toph couldn't hide a shiver. "You are *not* a nice guy."

"No," Shidan said quietly. "But I hope, at least, to be a kind dragon." His breath was hot, even when he stood to his full height. "If the ghosts do declare otherwise, some might set their vengeance aside. There is a place of ever-burning fires now, close enough to honor lost souls."

Byakko seeks those who wish to do that honor first, and avenge the dead later." A growling sigh. "It's not much, cub. I do know that. But if we can give passage to those who are grieving, yet still aware enough to think beyond the cry for blood..." Robes rustled as he shook his head. "At least, if your friend must strike to defend himself, he will only kill those willing to die."

Toph rubbed a hand on the back of her neck. No good. All the hairs there were *still* standing straight up.

Lucky I've got a distraction. "Company's coming."

"Friends, or locals?"

"Friends of mine," Toph said firmly. "Don't know how they feel about you. Sparky and Uncle kind of left a mark." *Of the smoking bodies on the beach type. Brrr.* She listened to the earth, sure now. "Not as bad as it could be. Katara's still out practicing." *With Hama,* she didn't say. Maybe Shidan had never been mixed up in the whole capturing-waterbenders mess, but he was still a *firebender*. Better they didn't run into each other. "Take off now, they probably won't see you."

"Not unless I wished it," Shidan mused. "I believe I would like to see Aang again. I must know how he has..."

Toph felt the footsteps coming toward them slow; heard Shidan suck in a breath. People must be seeing each other.

"Changed," Shidan finished in a near-whisper. "Or not. Agni. No wonder we could never find him. We sought a young man, and then a grown one. This..."

Toph felt his wince, and wondered why. He'd talked to Zuko, right? Sparky knew Aang had been trapped in an iceberg all these years. Didn't he?

But Kuzon didn't know it, Toph realized. He spent his whole life looking for Aang, and he couldn't find him. Because nobody could find him. He was in an ice-cube in the bottom of the ocean.

Which was just *way* unfair, and she hoped Zuko never found out about it. Sparky already thought the world was out to get him. This would be *proof*.

"Toph!" Sokka hailed them, footsteps jiggling in the way that meant he was waving an arm and probably had a big dopey grin plastered on his face. "Who's your new friend?"

Toph smirked. She hated manners. But sometimes, they could be *fun*. "Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe, Aang of the Southern Air Temple-"

"Hey, wait!" Aang protested.

"-This is Shidan of Byakko," Toph finished. Giggling inside; Sokka and Aang made such *funny* vibrations when they were hyperventilating.

"Good afternoon," Shidan inclined his head. "You suspect evil spirits have a hand in the forest disappearances? I have not found traces of such, yet. But it may be that I have not yet searched in the right place."

"Ah - but - you-" Aang gulped.

"Great name," Sokka reminded Aang with a poke. "He's supposed to handle this kind of thing." His voice shifted, facing toward Shidan. "In your own domain. You're kind of far from home."

"As is one of mine, missing this past month," Shidan replied. "Have you found any signs?"

Aang was up on his tip-toes in a way Toph knew meant he was thinking about airbending. "Um..."

"I see Toph is not the only wary one," Shidan observed. "Good; it will keep you alive longer. In short, then. I did not come here to aid you, but I did not come here to harm you. Nor will I." A shift of his weight; Toph heard the faint, impatient growl creep into his tone. "Unless you do plan to do what the Fire Lords have always sworn you would, and lay waste to our nation with earthquake, tsunami, and hurricane? No? I thought not. Then may we at least share that which we do know, for the hope of those vanished? I know little, save that one of mine was last known to be near here. Yet I have not yet found anything amiss."

"That's nice," Aang said at last.

"Twinkletoes?" Toph exclaimed, incredulous. "Come on! This is-"

"I know who he is, Toph. You trust Zuko. Fine. You trust Iroh, too. But they hurt Katara." Aang's voice shifted, facing Shidan's way. "Sorry. But I know your grandson."

"Do you," Shidan said levelly.

"And maybe you're a great name, and maybe you're trying to help, like Sokka says," Aang allowed. "But all the great names are under the Fire Lord, right? So whatever's upsetting the spirits here, it's something Ozai *lets* happen."

Toph felt Shidan stiffen. "Young man-"

"So it's my job," Aang cut him off. "I'm the Avatar. You just... stay out of the way, okay? And don't make things any worse."

"Um." Sokka gulped. "Aang?"

Toph felt a brush of heat through her toes, and readied herself. She didn't want to hurt Shidan, but the old dragon *said* he had a temper...

"You are a young fool, with all Air's pride. And whoever taught you of the spirits should be flogged," Shidan said coldly. "Very well. If you do not wish temporary alliance, then Byakko has its own measures to take. Lady Bei Fong? Do stay alive."

Turning on his heel, Shidan started toward town.

"Sorry... I can't let you!"

Earth shot up and out with Aang's fists, swallowing the dragon to his shoulders.

"Aang, buddy," Sokka muttered, "I don't think this is a good idea."

"I really am sorry," Aang sighed. "But you can't tell Ozai about us. We'll... have a friend let you go after we're gone. Okay?"

"Aang!" Oh, Toph was *this* far from just stomping all that rock to dust. But she'd try talking first. Aang liked people to talk, right? "He *hates* Ozai. He's not gonna tell anybody about us-"

"Enough." Shidan's voice was oddly calm, for a firebender trapped in bent stone. "Avatar Aang. Have you truly mastered any element?"

Uh-oh, Toph thought, chilled.

"Because if you *had* mastered earthbending..."

She knew that tone. That was Zuko's *I'm about to break things* tone.

But he's buried in rock! What can he - do-

Heat. Flowing through the ground, like walking near a slow fire.

"...You would know your mistake." Shidan inhaled, and *breathed*.

Stone poured from him like boiling water.

Toph took quick steps back, heat rolling past her face like an open oven, carrying the scent of burned soil. Shidan flowed out of the hole in the path, a graceful sweep of arms catching up molten stone into a dragon of lava between himself and a gaping Aang-

Shidan breathed out, and lava crackled into cooling stone.

"All earth here remembers fire," the dragon growled. "Every boulder. Every tree. Every leaf blown in the wind. Every drop of water on these islands! All, born of the fire mountains and their struggle against sea and sky! This land is *Fire!*" He lowered his hands, steam hissing from his breath. "And I am a firebending master. Do *not* cross me, boy. I have no more patience with *foolishness*."

Aang shuddered. "You- but- Jeong Jeong never-"

"Jeong Jeong was not standing on an active volcano," Shidan said dryly.

"Shiyu said it took an Avatar to bend lava." The shiver went right down Aang's spine to shake the ground under him. "*You're not human.*"

Toph tensed. This was going to go *so* wrong.

"So the Avatar can recognize the spirit-touched, when they stare him in the face," Shidan mused. "Finally." Sharp nails clicked together. "You think yourself the only one to mediate between mortal lives and the spirits, boy? Then how *will* you deal with me?"

"I - um - give me a minute..."

"Take your time. But do *not* take mine." A *hmph*. "You. Young swordsman. I have heard you know of great names. Know *this*. One of mine was lost within that forest. If I do not return with her, Byakko will *burn it to the ground*."

"No!" Aang jumped between Shidan and the nearest path to the woods. "That won't solve anything!"

"No? In a land of fire, and you are so certain we do not need a cleansing blaze?" Shidan cocked his head. "You assume much, airbender."

Toph held her breath. Because Aang wasn't bouncing anymore. His toes were almost still, like grass just before a breeze.

"Yeah," Aang said quietly. "I'm an airbender. And maybe I *don't* know. But I've got to try another way!"

A relieved breath whooshed out of her, and Toph grinned. No bouncing. No panic. Head and heart and bending all settled and pointing, true as a lodestone. Now *that* was Twinkletoes at his best.

And with luck, it'd let them avoid Twinkletoes at his *crispiest*.

"Given the fines Byakko would bear for burning down another domain's forest, so would I," Shidan observed.

Aang thumped back down on his heels. "Why's a spirit care about money? It's - you know. Human stuff."

Sokka shifted on his feet, obviously keeping his mouth shut.

He knows, Toph realized. *He knows what Shidan is. How?*

"And this is where your teachers have failed," Shidan sighed. "I am *not* a spirit, young airbender. I am spirit-touched, and as mortal as you. Mostly."

"But... you're *not* human," Aang protested.

"I am not," Shidan agreed. "Yet I am bound to humans, and have kin among them. We live within human laws. And if we do not, we accept the consequences of breaking them. A forest fire would be very inconvenient." He paused. "But one of my domain is lost. Perhaps dead. Perhaps worse. I mean to search for her. If I fail, and fall victim - then Byakko will bear that fine, and gladly. For any malice that can swallow such as I would be a worse threat to our nation than you can imagine."

"...You're going to give the spirit a chance to grab you, before anybody burns anything down." Aang drew a step back, stunned.

"Has the rushing wind deafened your ears?" Shidan *hmp*hed. "Yes. Of course."

"Of *course*?"

"I am a great name." Heat brushed the ground again. "I am responsible for my people. I am responsible for nurturing the spirits who choose to dwell in our domain. And for standing against those who would do harm, unjust and uncalled-for. Do you think me so proud as to assume Hitomi faultless, simply because she is one of mine? I will find this spirit, if spirit it is. I will ask its grievance. And if amends can be made, we will make them. Only if the spirit is lost to malice, twisted and corrupt, will Bayakko strike."

Aang flung up his hands in disbelief. "Then why didn't you *say* that?"

Sokka slapped himself in the forehead, and sighed.

Shidan growled under his breath. "Because anyone who has wandered as much of the Fire Nation as you have should be able to see that most spirits are *not* wreaking havoc! Which should inform you, if you would root your feet to earth long enough to *think*, that most of those who hold this land in their trust, *are carrying out their duty!*"

Silence. Even the cricket-mice nibbling seeds in the bushes went still. Toph swore she could hear Aang blink.

"Agni." The growl faded, weary. "Did that never occur to you? Did you only see war, and death, and think all you had seen was malice and evil?"

Aang set his stance. "Attacking innocent people *is* evil!"

"But it is not *malice*," Shidan snapped. "Not as spirits know it. The war was *ordered*. For a hundred years, the Fire Lords have commanded us to war. And the great names *must* obey. They care for their domains, so most spirits who dwell within them are at peace. But turn against their duty? Turn against the Fire Lord Avatar Kyoshi set above us? We would have a bloodbath the likes of which this land has never seen, as the spirits themselves turned on us!"

"But... that's not *fair*," Aang said at last.

"If your teachers in spirits told you they were fair, they have done us all a grave disservice," Shidan stated. "Shirotora cares for Byakko because our domain cares for him. Agni cares for the Fire Nation because we *are* fire, and creation, and destruction. The Face-Stealer cares for souls drowned in his domain as a miser does his gold; because they will give him *what he wants*." Shidan sighed. "And the Avatar Spirit cares for the world, because it *is* the world. It does not seek justice. It does not *understand* justice. It knows only threats to the world, and that threats must be destroyed."

Toph could feel Aang's heart hammering. "You don't think that," she insisted. Even though that slow, steady dragon's heart said he really, really *did*.

"I do," Shidan said calmly. "But I also know what the Fire Lords will never admit. The Avatar Spirit was *not* Kyoshi. It was not Roku. And it is not Aang." He inclined his head to the airbender. "You hold the world's power within you. *You* must decide, each and every day, if you will seek human justice, or a spirit's revenge. You stand between two worlds, apart from both. And I would not be in your place for all the world; not even if time were turned back, and all Makoto's evil undone, and my clan alive once more." His toes tapped once, like a cat-owl's twitching tail. "You believe you risk much by accepting my aid. Has it never occurred to you I risk Hitomi's life by seeking yours?"

Aang froze. Shook his head, ends of his headband brushing short hair. "That doesn't even make *sense*."

"Yeah, it does," Sokka said grimly. "Aang. He's saying if there's an angry spirit in those woods, it *might* be mad 'cause someone's trying to go *against the Fire Lord*."

Aang gulped. "It's not," he said, voice only a little shaky. "It can't be."

"I pray you are right. For both our sakes." Shidan's hand swept toward town. "Those who dwell here will know more of the hazards of the night, and you have been here longer than I. Where shall we ask?"

Chapter End Notes

There is a difference between an act seen as evil (you're killing my people) and an act defined as *malicious*. In Anglo-American law, malice "is expressed when there is manifested a deliberate intention unlawfully to take away the life of a human being."

The key word there is "unlawfully". If you're a soldier fighting an enemy country, killing that country's soldiers on the battlefield is, generally, not unlawful.

Spirits are not about justice. They are about rules. Check any fairy tale. There are no extenuating circumstances. You break the rules, you pay the price. You follow the rules - even if you warp the letter of them 'til it bends around backward - and you're generally home free.

Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

No way could I improve on the awesomeness of the Katara/Hama fight. So it happens
- just with a little alteration in who shows up at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"How'd you know?" the earthbender demanded.

At least Toph had waited until they were in town and Aang was distracted, Sokka thought, looking down at the small fist gripping his tunic. "Um." He tried to pry her loose. No good; Toph was in the mood to be sticky as a sandspur. "Know what?"

"What Shidan is!"

Oh. "Hey, we met Temul. Kind of a graphic demonstration of your average, everyday, kill it with fire dragon-child."

Toph cocked her head, listening. "You know about dragon-children?"

"Um... yeah. Temul kind of-" Sokka's brain caught up with his mouth. "Wait a minute. How do *you* know about them?"

Toph shrugged. "Girl talk. With Teruko."

Okay, that just boggled the mind. Toph and girl talk just did not belong in the same universe.

Then again, neither did Fire Navy marine Teruko. Anybody with a temper and nails like that...

Oh.

Briefly, Sokka harbored a fantasy of zipping back in time and thunking a few people on that beach over the head. Himself included. There had to be some kind of spirit who could pull it off.

So Teruko was a dragon-child. And she'd taken Zuko under her protection when he broke loyalty; no ifs, ands, or buts. Which, given what Sokka knew from Temul, almost guaranteed she saw him as her clan, even though they'd never met before.

So Teruko knew what he was. And she and Toph were talking... "You knew what Zuko was all this time?" And man, Zuko actually made *sense* now. Nobody human tracked down a guy across the whole world because their dad said so.

"Hey. *His* business, not yours," Toph shot back. "You heard what Aang said about Shidan. He doesn't even get that dragons are people."

Which Shidan? Sokka almost asked. Because there were two Shidans in this mess, both from Byakko...

Shidan of Byakko.

Zuko's grandfather.

"...Mommy."

Uneasy, Toph let go. "Sokka?"

Sokka swallowed, and glanced at the old swordsman questioning a noodle-seller on the other side of the street. The old *dragon*. "Tell me nobody's selling barbecue sauce?"

For once, Toph didn't look sure of herself. "Figured it out, huh?"

"Having a hard time *believing* it, but - yeah." Whoa. "I hope Appa stays out of sight. Just because he's smaller right now... Appa still smells like lunch."

"Sokka!" Toph punched him in the arm. "He *knows* Appa. Think about it."

Oh. Right. *Weird*.

"Relax, Snoozles." Toph started walking again. "He said what he's after. And it's not us."

"Um." Sokka made his feet move. Dragon. Walking right in the middle of people who'd kill him if Ozai knew what he was. Gah.

Well. Now he knew where Zuko got his guts.

"So Ozai's got a shoot to kill order on his wife's father, and he doesn't even know it." Sokka shook his head, trying to rattle loose aching thoughts. "That explains *so much* about Crazy Blue Fire."

"Yeah. At least all my parents want to do is kidnap me."

Right. When had their lives gotten so weird? "Wonder if he knows anything about telling ghosts you don't need to get your butt kicked *every* night..."

Toph poked him. "You're talking to ghosts?"

"Just one," Sokka stammered, before he could think about it. "Geh. Could you not ask? She says she's fine on the whole revenge on Aang thing. But I don't know if Aang is."

"And you don't want Katara mad at you for sneaking off with another ghost girl behind Yue's back."

"And I definitely don't want Katara mad at me," Sokka started. Blinked. "Eww! Toph! Temul's not a girl!"

...Maybe he should hope something knocked him out. Before he spilled any other big secrets.

"Temul." Toph grinned. "And she's not grinding Aang into the dirt? That's got to bite." She bounced as she walked. "How bad does she flatten you?"

"Can we not talk about this in town?" Sokka asked, keeping his voice low. "It's... kind of complicated." He looked ahead, where Aang had just caught up with a nervous-looking porter. "And I think Aang found something."

Old Man Ding, Sokka sorted out of Aang's chatter and the porter's wary, sunset-eyeing replies. *So somebody does know something.*

I wonder what kind of spirit we're up against this time?

"I didn't know spirits made prisons."

"They don't."

Toph shivered as she bent another set of chains loose from stone, Shidan's low growl still rumbling through her ears. Way easier to listen to that, with all its promise of teeth and flames, than to the horror her feet were showing her. Starved victims sinking to the floor as she loosened their chains. Groaning, bone-broken men; weeping women; a few kids too frightened to even cry. And the smells, the awful, throat-clogging *stink*, that told her she did not want to go any farther back in the cavern...

"Hitomi. Get Lady Bei Fong some fresh air."

"Y-yes, Lord Shidan!"

Toph almost growled at the shivering lady, ex-prisoner or not. "I'm not running away!"

"I want to run away." Hitomi's voice quavered a little, as she wove on tender feet toward the cave entrance. "Lord Shidan's been on battlefields before. He - he can do this..."

Aw, heck. Maybe it wasn't *Lady Bei Fong* Shidan wanted out of this hell-pit. Hitomi was shaking like Twinkletoes after a pot of double-brewed tea.

Give the lady some credit, though. She got out into open air before she curled up in a little ball and started crying. Toph nibbled her lip, and patted Hitomi on one ragged shoulder. "Hey. It's gonna be okay."

"No air, only stone... I couldn't *breathe*..."

Okay, that was a little weird. "Lots of air out here," Toph pointed out. "Whole sky full of it. See?" She sucked in a noisy breath, blew it back out like Aang making a funny face. "Plenty of..."

Fluttery heartbeat. Quick breaths, that somehow took in more air than anybody should be able to breathe. A light weight on the ground, lighter than even a month of short rations should leave someone that tall; like even Hitomi's bones weren't heavy enough. She'd only ever felt one other person like that.

"...You're a yamabushi."

Hitomi went rigid.

"No, no, it's okay!" Toph said quickly. Grabbed one of Hitomi's hands, and put it on her back so the lady could *feel* her breathe. "I know Teruko. She's a marine on Captain Jee's ship. Now she's looking after Sparky... I mean, Shidan's grandson. You know. Zuko."

"You know the prince?" Hitomi's heartbeat slowed a little. "I thought... all the reports say you're the Avatar's teacher."

Ooof. They were getting into where things got *complicated*. "I'm Aang's teacher," Toph agreed. "Earthbending. And I'm gonna help him stop this war. So Ozai's going down." She grinned. "But Sparky and I broke up a Dai Li prison together. He's okay."

"You broke up a..." Reluctantly, Hitomi started to laugh.

"So. We good?" Toph shrugged. "'Cause Aang's going to love talking to another airbender-"

"I'm not an airbender!"

Toph poked herself in the side of her head. Nope; nothing rattling loose. "But you're a yamabushi."

"We're not all - he's a *Temple* child, you can't tell him-" Hyperventilating, Hitomi cut herself off. Gulped, and deliberately held her breath.

Not an airbender? Toph shook her head. Aang said all the Air Nomads were airbenders.

Hitomi let air rush out, and started breathing again. "Don't tell him. A Temple child, the danger - I'll *lie* if you tell him!"

Whoa. Toph's toes cringed from that fierce truth. "Okay. I got it. You're just a merchant. But why? Aang wouldn't hurt... somebody he's got stuff in common with."

"So long as Monk Aang lives, the Temple lives," Hitomi stated. "The Elders were talking to Monk Gyatso before... before the war. But his apprentice wasn't old enough to find his Way. We aren't to speak of the morning wind until he is."

"His *way*?" Toph frowned.

"It's... important," Hitomi said carefully. "When you're old enough to ask questions. And think of your own answers." She shifted her head, probably looking aside. "I'm sorry. I can't explain any farther."

Got that right; she hadn't explained. But at least Hitomi wasn't shaking anymore. "You don't want to walk on those," Toph said bluntly. She'd felt every little wince as the merchant had scrambled out of the cave. It made her feet cringe all the way to her spine. The skin was whole, but the muscles under it... ow. How had Hama *done* that?

Not asking. I don't want to know. "If we get the kids out, can you look after them?"

"Of course, but-"

"Good." Toph cupped her hands around her mouth. "Tell 'em to hang onto something, Grandpa! I'm bringing everybody out!"

Deep breath. Plant one foot. Reach out - reach *into* the mountain - like locking onto the wrist and arm of a guy about to go splat. And *yank*.

Earth roared.

Hitomi *meeped*.

Toph smirked, feeling all those warm, scared, *living* people up on the surface again. First she'd bust up Hama's fun spot. Then she'd bust up Hama. "Yeah. I am *so* cool."

"...You called Lord Shidan *Grandpa*."

Airbenders. Never impressed by the important stuff.

Worst. Night. Of my life, Sokka thought, blood running cold as Katara cried like her heart was breaking, and Hama just stood there and laughed. Given his nights now included getting his butt

almost sliced off by a cranky ghost on a regular basis, that was saying something.

But Temul just tried her damndest to *almost* kill him. What Hama had made them do, made *Katara* do-

Right now, all his nerves were in shake-until-I-realize-I'm-still-alive mode. When it wore off...

I hate that woman. I really, really hate her.

It was hard, and it *hurt*. Hate the sea raiders who'd killed their mother? Easy. They were Fire Nation, and they'd come to kill any waterbender they could find. Hating them was like breathing. You just did it.

Hate someone from his own tribe? It was like tearing his heart out.

Aang was trying to hug Katara, as much as she'd let him. Good. Somebody ought to keep telling her she wasn't a monster. Right now, he... oh, spirits.

She's still laughing.

And it was weird, because Sokka would have thought he'd be getting madder. But he wasn't. He just felt... cold.

Sooner or later, Aang's going to snap back to earth with the rest of us. And then he's going to get mad.

The last time anyone had done anything this horrible to Katara, General Fong had lost big chunks of his fortress. Hama didn't have a fortress, but the moon was still up, and-

Hama doesn't know Aang's a waterbender.

If she did, if she realized her sick little game wasn't *done* yet-

He had to be quick. And he had to be subtle. If Hama saw him coming it'd be skewering time all over again.

Yeah. He knew what he had to do. Now to get his feet to move and *do* it.

Dad would do it. He's the chief. Sometimes you can't wait for the tribe to decide. And we know the Fire Nation can't hold her.

Dad would do it. Come on, move...

"Sokka, look out!"

Toph, heading for them at a dead run. A whole bunch of angry ex-prisoners were running or staggering after her, chains and other improvised weapons in hand. But right behind Toph-

Hama snarled, and Sokka knew what she saw. Even under moonlight, gold sea-silk didn't look like anything else.

"Firebender!"

Gray eyes gleaming, Hama raised a withered hand-

"Don't talk in a fight."

Piandao and Temul had hammered it into him, day and night. Fighting in war *wasn't* Water Tribe fighting. There was no honor in it. No glorious story-songs later, of how you'd taunted your enemy and left him bruised and bleeding on the ice to lick his wounds and feel shamed. There was only you, and the people who were going to be *dead*.

"Never talk in a fight. Talking means you're thinking. Thinking means you're reacting. You need to act.

"The man behind that blade is going to kill you. He'll kill you, your friends, your dreams.

"Don't talk. Don't think. Kill him first!"

Hama had thought. Hama had reacted. All in the space of one breath.

Shidan had *moved*.

Hama twisted away from the gleam of moonlight on steel, blood a dark line down one arm. The sweep of hand she'd meant to swat Shidan to the ground with was disrupted, turned into a clenched fist to *hold*-

Wheeling from a rising slash, Shidan froze.

"Steel? And where's a firebender's pride?" Hama side-stepped away, fist still clenched. "You should have seared me."

"Throw fire, against one who can twist a man's movements awry, in a forest your battle has stripped of water," Shidan gritted out, unmoving. "Oh, yes. Because a crown fire at the hour of ghosts is such a *gracious* gift to those who've survived your hate."

Which didn't ring right, Sokka thought, desperately trying to inch out of Hama's line of sight. He'd seen Jeong Jeong light fire on *water*. Shidan could have burned his enemy down without scorching the forest-

Dragons don't kill with fire, Temul's gift whispered to him. *Not if they have any other way. They use claws...*

And they go for the throat.

Darkness on dark clothing. *Not* from Hama's arm. Which meant-

Didn't mean anything while she was still trying to *kill* them, Sokka knew, glancing frantically around the clearing for anything that might tip the odds their way. And coming up empty. Hama kept both swordsmen in view, her open back turned to Aang and Katara like two benders were no threat at all. And damn it, they *weren't*. Katara was still kneeling, tears slipping down her face, and Aang was holding onto her like a lifeline, pale as a sick fish.

And the worst of it was he couldn't blame them. He *couldn't*. Katara thought water was the most blessed, noble element, and Aang thought nobody could *make* you do anything.

The fact that somebody like Hama even *existed* - meant they were wrong.

Hissing, Hama started to drag her clenched fist *down*-

It wouldn't move.

Shidan wasn't moving.

"All that lives bends with water," Hama snapped. "Bow, lordling! Know you are beaten at last!"

"By such as you? Never." Sweat beaded the old dragon's face, but his teeth gleamed sharp and bright. "I am Agni's child. The blood in my veins is *fire*. Bend me to your will? You'll bend a bonfire first!"

"Your blood, perhaps," Hama sneered. "Theirs?" Cackling, she slashed her bloodied hand outward, water flowing off the ground into a flurry of ice-daggers-

"Toph!" Sokka yelled. "Wall!"

Hama's invisible hand clamped on his veins, and he wanted to swear. Or scream.

But earth grated on earth, as Toph trusted him and flung up barriers against the attack she *couldn't see*.

Ice whined into soil, thudding in a way that shivered his spine. Gleaming like poisoned diamonds, it sawed down.

Toph might not be able to see water in air, but she could feel her defensive shell ripping apart. The earthbender skipped a step sideways, clapped her hands together-

Soil clamped around Hama, mounded to her neck.

Got her. Sokka drew in a breath of relief as his arms and legs worked to his will again. *Now, what do we do-*

Earth powdered into dust on the wind, and blew away.

Oh, hell no.

Hama stalked out of scattering dust, arms and hands wreathed in thick bands of water. "Water is *everywhere*, little earthbender. Even in the breath of a flame!"

Ice-needles. Everywhere.

Sokka was moving before he'd figured out what he was moving *for*; black metal shattering icy edges, leaving his hands and arms stung and slashed, seeping red in the firelight. But only slashes, while trees beside him glittered with needles thick as boarqupine quills...

Firelight.

A shielding globe of flame, like Azula's, sizzling ice to steam before it could impale Toph's hapless bunch of ex-prisoners. But some of the ice cracked instead of melting, Hama's swirl of arms and body whipping shards around to stab unprotected skin.

This time, nothing could explain the screams away.

"You have to stop this!"

Aang. Running up to Hama like she hadn't played him like a puppet minutes before; like he wasn't bleeding from a half-dozen ice-slashes too numb to hurt. "I know you're angry. I know they hurt you! But this is-"

A torrent of ice swatted him away, like Gran-Gran tossing out spoiled squid.

"Wrong?" Hama's smile froze Sokka's blood. "To show my young apprentice just what a bloodbender can do? Watch, Katara! Our enemies *give* us our weapons!"

Gnarled hands swept wide, pulled inward-

There was a *pulling* at Sokka's skin, like an unseen leech had bitten down. Blood leapt from his cuts like iron dust to a lodestone, joining the red swirling away from more screams, pulsing into a crimson globe between Hama's cracked palms as she laughed, laughed...

Something rattled, and Hama tripped over air. Staggered, eyes wide-

Crumpled to the ground, crimson splashing over Aang's feet.

Fire flickered; vanished. Shidan drew a hissing breath, looking down on the fallen bloodbender. "Your death's name," he said quietly, hand on one hilt, "is *Haegiri*."

Fly-Cutter.

The last of the blood-globe fell apart, gurgling into dry earth. Hama stared at them all, gasping for the breath to move, bend, *live*...

"Hateful, evil woman." Shidan's lip curled; a snarl of disgust. "So bent on taking our blood, you forgot your own."

Matted with blood, gray hair fell. And didn't rise.

"No!" Shuddering, Katara shot to her feet. "No, she can't be - you couldn't have-!"

Aang caught her. "It's... it's over." Gray eyes were wide as saucers. "I just - don't know *how*..."

Make sure. Nerving himself, Sokka tipped Hama's head to the side, exposing the razor-thin slash that had licked across the pulse of her throat.

Shoulder to waist, Hama's dress was sodden with blood.

"*Get the apprentice!*"

Sokka didn't know which of the ragged survivors had yelled it, and didn't care. He just put himself and his sword between Katara and the mob, hoping he wouldn't have to kill people they'd tried to save-

Toph slapped palms against air, and clawed her hands, a barrier of spikes sprouting in front of the rush. "You stop that right now! Katara was trying to help you!"

If they got out of this alive, Sokka was never complaining about Toph scamming people again.

One of the more wild-eyed men thrust an accusing finger Katara's way. "That monster called you her apprentice!"

"This child, her *sishyah*?" Shidan snorted. "Are you blind?"

One who needs to be taught, Sokka thought. Which *wasn't* apprentice, not by a long shot. Though, in a really weird way, it fit what Hama had been doing so scarily better...

And... damn it. Shidan had dragged in High Court. Which might get him a better listen from scared strangers, but meant Katara and Aang would be *totally clueless* about what was really being said.

If they decided to jump in - how was he going to argue their way out of this without cracking out his own High Court in front of everybody? Which was *not* going to go over well, no matter what he said, and the last thing they needed was an angry Avatar or waterbender in this mess-

"Look at her, man!" Shidan snarled on. "Do those tears trace the flesh of one who wishes to follow evil into darkness? Show me a pupil more *sunya-susrusha* than she!"

Devoid of desire to hear or learn, Sokka knew. *Deserted. Desolate.*

Damn. He could *hug* the old dragon. Shidan wasn't just saying she wasn't Hama's apprentice. He was *defying* the charge. Defending her in the way these people would understand; that Katara saw evil *and wanted no part of it*.

Sokka let out a shaky breath, and nodded to catch Katara's eye. Winked at her.

For a second, she just stared at him. Then straightened, and moved closer to Aang, arm circling his shoulders.

Yes! Yes, exactly! Sokka almost grinned. *He's a kid. You're older, you're responsible for him. You had to do what you had to do, they'll get that...*

"There is her brother!" Shidan growled. "There her clan-allies, who did risk themselves to save you! Who of us would not pick up even a poisoned blade, to save our kin from evil? *Who of us would not?*"

Aang almost made a noise. Sokka stomped his toes.

"This girl was *lied* to," Shidan went on, voice heated enough to raise steam. "This girl was *deceived*. This girl thought she dealt with an innocent woman - as we all thought! Who would believe another human capable of such malice? Who would ever?"

Which pretty much turned everything Gran-Gran and the rest of the tribe's elders had said about the Fire Nation on its head. Sokka had to blink, disoriented. If he hadn't been flying around the world with Aang for months, meeting people from crazy-but-okay like Aang and the Kyoshi Islanders to straight out *crazy* like Azula-

I'd probably be running right at them screaming about the evil Fire Nation, Sokka knew. *Ouch.*

Aang and Toph weren't going to run screaming at anybody - for entirely different reasons. But Katara...

"She had to stop." Katara's fingers clutched her skirt. "That was... she had to stop. We don't *do* this."

"Indeed not," Shidan said gravely. "Your ways are hard, but you well know how to deal with evil when you find it." He turned to the crowd; not a mob, not now, with those tired and hurt looks on gaunt faces. "Take the injured back to the village. Rouse the Guard, after dawn, to clear that hellhole's depths. *After* dawn. We may all need its safety." He glanced at the body, then at Aang. "These young ones know the ways our foe abandoned, and this young gentleman has some of a Sage's training. We shall see to it no water-ghost stalks by moonlight."

Aang gulped. "I'm... not really good with all the shaman stuff yet."

"Which is why you will not act alone," Shidan stated. "We will manage." He granted Aang a nod, then bowed to the crowd. "Journey safely, and see the dawn."

A scattered flurry of bows came in return, and the crowd started filtering away. Sokka closed his eyes, just for a moment, and sagged in relief.

We made it. We're going to live.

And he hadn't had to hurt anybody they'd tried to save. There were no words for that desperate relief.

Toph's knuckles jabbed his ribs. "Don't fall asleep on us now, Snoozles."

"Sleep!" Sokka shuddered. Glanced at the blackness soaking the forest floor, that in daylight would show drying crimson. "I never want to sleep again."

"How could she do this?" Katara shivered. "I don't understand. Even if someone's just *evil*... how could she?"

"Monk Gyatso told me a story once." Aang wouldn't quite look at the body. "It wasn't something the Elders liked us kids hearing, but... He said that the wind was our friend. But once in a while, in a really long time, there was a dark wind that could blow through people. And if we thought we felt it, we should get away from that person. Until it blew away."

"Your master was a wise man," Shidan nodded. "Hama... she was never a kind woman. But she suffered more than any soul should have to bear." He held out a hand. "Come. Let us bear your dead to the sea. And I will tell you of *why*."

Chapter End Notes

Anyone else wonder how on earth the Gaang got away unscathed at the end of Puppetmaster in canon? Hama out-and-out said Katara was a bloodbender *in front of her victims*. You'd think they'd rip the whole crew apart.

I've read some old aikido masters take up iaido for exercise - and they can be blindingly, devastatingly fast. To quote one, "You think I am faster than you? No! I am an old man! You are faster than me! The difference is I *move*, while you are only thinking of moving."

Chapter 60

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

She could make you do things. Someone can make you do things. Safely back on land after they'd dropped Hama's canvas-wrapped body into the deep, Aang buried his face in Appa's welcome fur.

He didn't want to look at the campfire Shidan had lit with a touch, or whatever the firebender was doing with it that made flames crackle and Hitomi sigh in grateful relief. Hitomi was *weird*. Washing her face and a new cloak made her a lot less shabby, but Aang still felt twitchy around her.

And he really didn't want to look across the fire, where Sokka and Katara were sitting, like this was any ordinary day. Like the person who'd killed someone - who'd let Hama *bleed to death* - was just... someone to talk to.

He didn't want to look at anyone. Not when the world was all *wrong*.

Hama made us almost kill each other. And Katara had to - she had to...

Appa rumbled comfortingly. Aang wished he could hide under thick fur and never, *ever* come out.

"What happened to her?" Katara's voice wavered. "She said - it was too awful to talk about. But it's never *winter* here, the sun never goes away, I didn't think anyone could-" She cut herself off.

"Be taken by the Wendigo in summer?" Shidan finished.

Sokka and Katara drew sharp breaths.

"Be easy." There was a crackle, as if Shidan had thrown something into the small fire. "I do know the proper ward-offs, when one must speak of the Cold Ones plainly." He raised his voice a bit. "If you ever must ask of them, Toph, be ready to throw salt in a fire. They hate salt, and will avoid it. And you."

"Um. 'Kay. Salt. Got it." Toph made a *tsk* sound, like sucking breath past her teeth. "Salt and fire. *Huh*."

"How do you know that?" Sokka pounced.

"When I was younger, I traveled many places," Shidan said, matter-of-fact. "The Southern Water Tribe had the closest waterbenders to the Southern Air Temple. Kuzon and I thought it a logical place to look for a young boy who had learned he was the Avatar." A sigh. "But Aang never reached your tribe. We searched; the whole of your coasts, I think. But there was no sign; in ice, sea, or sky. Still, while we were there, we learned of the people we hoped Aang had set out to find. And Kuzon had an idea."

Hidden in the rise and fall of Appa's furry breaths, Aang listened.

"Sozin sought the Avatar, and we knew he would never rest until Aang was found," Shidan went on. "We sought reports of unusual bending? So did the Fire Lord. Training a master bender takes *time*. It is *noticeable*. The damage, from misaimed blows of a master's strength; never to mention an Avatar's-!" He *hmped*. "We knew, should we find Aang, we would be racing the very wind to

keep him alive. So Kuzon and I thought on *how* an Avatar is trained. What, above all, he needs to know. And we set out to acquire it." A low chuckle. "Kuzon could no more bend water than he could fly, but he did learn the basics of the style. And others. Had he lived to find you, Toph, he would have been at your feet for weeks. The precision of your steps, how your bending flows with the fractures of the earth rather than cracking it as senseless stone..." He trailed off. "Forgive me. I miss my friend.

"So. Hama." A harsh breath. "As you say, we lack winter as you know it. The sun lessens, but it never vanishes. It was not the Cold Ones' touch that drove Hama. It was her fury at evil of quite another sort. Azulon's evil."

A long pause. Aang counted Appa's breaths.

"Azulon's evil is very difficult for one of Fire to unravel," Shidan said carefully. "In part, because much of it does not look like evil at all. It steals the robes of expediency, and if our path is not well-lit, we believe we walk with one of our dearest friends."

"What's expediency?" Toph asked, suspicious.

Aang rolled his eyes, and lifted his face away from fur. "It's when people do stuff they shouldn't, just because it's *easy*."

"The Air Nomads have often defined it so," Shidan said dryly. "For all the speed of the wind, the Temples were never ones to act in haste. Fire is, and so we hold to the older meanings. Speed. Fitness for the task. Seeing an opportunity to be efficient - to gain the most flame from the least fuel - and taking it."

"You're good at taking," Katara said darkly.

"You're not very good at gratitude," Hitomi muttered.

"Gratitude?" Katara shot back. "One of my people had to die! What am I supposed to be grateful for?"

"Your lives?"

"Hitomi," Shidan reproved her. "If Katara feels she and those she travels with were not in danger, they likely were not. The young lady is a waterbender. If she chose to pull hearts to battle each other, rather than only feel the terror and self-loathing Hama inflicted, then we would have been the ones in danger of our lives." He *hmped*. "'Your pardon, Lord Sabe. I had to kill several of your missing citizens in self-defense.' Oh yes. That conversation would have gone *so* well."

"You're cruel," Katara whispered.

"Would you had met Azulon," Shidan mused. "Then you might compare us." Flames crackled. "Ah, but you almost did. And that was no mere mischance, young lady. Azulon had a plan, gathering the waterbenders of your tribe. And that is where expediency cloaks evil."

"He didn't *gather* my mother-!"

Thuds; footsteps brought to a sudden halt. "Katara." Sokka's voice was level. Warning. "Shidan. They didn't come to take prisoners. Not that time."

"So I now know," Shidan said thoughtfully. "And that, I still find troubling. Azulon had a plan to find and capture the Avatar. Why should he abandon it, with over half the Earth Kingdom still to

fall?"

Sokka made an impatient noise. "How could taking waterbenders be a plan to catch- oh." The Water Tribe boy muttered something under his breath that didn't sound at all friendly. "He wasn't after us, was he? We were just *in the way*."

"Somebody want to translate for those of us whose brains aren't hung up on sharp edges?" Toph put in.

"The worst evil can come not from hate, but from indifference," Shidan stated. "Azulon's plan, first as a general and then as Fire Lord, was to arrange the world to his liking. Rather than hunt the Avatar - which he had done, as Sozin before him and Iroh and Ozai after - he would make the Avatar find *him*. Think! If Aang were dead, and as years passed it seemed he must be, a new Avatar *must* learn Air. With the Temples gone, Azulon knew of only one place Air's teachings could surely be found, and the onmitsu were under his control. Why should he not seek to hold Water in his grasp as well?" A rumbling sigh. "The North Sozin had ventured, and found too strong. But the South... your villages were free, yet divided. So Azulon began there."

Aang winced.

"That's sick," Katara got out.

"Worked, though." Toph sounded queasy herself. "Like dropping a boulder on an anthill. Ugh."

"Remind me not to tell you the tale of Shuten Douji until you are older," Shidan noted. "Let it be enough to know that while we love our clans and our nation, we do not trust those outside a great name's authority. And if an outsider threatens what is ours - well. There is little we will *not* do, if we must resort to Low War."

"Shuten Douji?" Sokka's voice squeaked. "Isn't that the one where Raikou convinced the mountain ogres he was harmless by - ooough." He gulped. "You know, back home, Raikou would've gotten pushed off an iceberg."

"And there, you would be justified," Shidan agreed. "Here, famine is not our constant shadow. Swords, fire, treachery; those prey on our minds. But the Cold Ones' hunger rarely brushes us. A hero can even step into such darkness - *briefly* - and return to the sunlight. With scars, yes. But *not* forever tainted by evil. That is why your sister's grief was believed." His voice darkened, almost a growl. "That is why Hama sought my life rather than surrender. She knew I had the rank to seek the truth; to tell you she *lied*. Yes, she was tortured. Yes, it was beyond what any soul should have to bear; caged away from sun and moon and sea, denied even the touch of a kinsman's hand. But she was not of the Southern Water Tribe. She was not of *any* tribe. Not from the night she slew her guards, and escaped - and left her tribesmen behind."

A hiccupping, shuddering breath. Katara's. "She said... she said she was the last."

"Likely she did." Shidan sighed, as if setting down a heavy weight. "You should know that after Hama's escape, the waterbenders' prison was no longer considered secure. The surviving prisoners were bound and placed aboard ship, to be more fully interrogated under onmitsu care." He paused. "Oddly enough, that ship was lightning-struck at sea, and foundered. It's fortunate one of our vessels was able to rescue the crew."

Katara almost hissed. "The *crew*-!"

"Sis." Sokka's voice sounded weird. Like he was almost grinning. "He *can't* tell us he rescued

waterbenders."

Startled, Aang poked his head out of fur.

Sokka *was* grinning. Katara looked mad. Shidan and Toph were listening...

And Hitomi was sitting primly by the fire, brewing tea. "My lord most certainly could *not* say so." Every word was precise as a tea-master setting out cups. "Stealing the Fire Lord's prisoners would be illegal. Even treason." She flicked a glance at Aang. "And some of those who travel on Byakko's business might be questioned. And *some* of us don't lie well."

Ow. Why did that sting?

"But you know who we are," Katara protested.

"You have a sky bison. You can leave and be gone in an instant." Hitomi watched the water, as if she wanted to catch the very moment it began to rise as steam. "Anyone my lord might have helped - would not."

Katara looked her over, cool as ice. "Don't worry about your lord. He didn't help anyone." An angry glance flicked at Sokka. "They would have *come home*."

"Wounded?" Shidan countered. "Shamed by contact with one-not-named? And even if there were no difficulties in acquiring a ship and running the blockade - I assure you, those would *not* be small - there is the unshakable fact that they knew the Fire Nation attacked to steal waterbenders. With Hama, the last, taken - your tribe was safe. Why, by all the spirits, would they have wished to bring harm back to your people?"

"The Fire Nation wouldn't have come back!" Katara sat straight, adamant. "They wouldn't have known!"

Shidan's eyes narrowed. "Really? Azulon's spies learned of *you*, young waterbender. Have you ever thought on how?"

Ooough. Aang felt like he had a stomach full of catfish-eels. Because... well, the Fire Nation showing up when he did, that was a flare's fault. But if the Fire Nation had been leaving Katara's tribe alone because they didn't have any waterbenders left... *How did they know?*

The way Katara's face went white, she already had an idea. "You think everybody's just like you, don't you?" she bit out. "Ready to betray even their own family!"

"If you do not see Hama's acts as betrayal," Shidan said heavily, "then I fear for us all."

Katara shuddered. "She was a monster." Blue eyes narrowed at Shidan. "But she was Water Tribe. She was *our* responsibility. You had no right!"

Shidan stared at her. Still. Utterly still, poised as a scorpion-viper.

Hitomi paled.

Toph stomped to her feet, and deliberately cracked her knuckles. "Man. I can see why trading with Water Tribes is tricky. Their debt books don't exactly balance, huh?"

Debt books? Aang almost said. That was silly, the Water Tribes didn't have...

Only they did. Kind of. Sideways-sort of. "Push and pull," Aang said shakily. "In and out.

Somebody inside - gets everything. Somebody outside - only gets the eddies. What doesn't matter." He looked at Toph. "Sit and wait. Earth... leans on each other. Balances the weight. Balances the debt." His eyes slid to Shidan, and that horrible predator stillness. "Attack. Hit back *first*. But a big fire... it pulls all the little fires toward it. So if you don't make sure they get something to burn, all you get is ashes..." Scary. It was *scary*, trying to see his friends like this. And people who weren't his friends. "Maybe Hama was Water Tribe, and you were responsible. But - she was *here*." *I don't want to do this. Killing's wrong, it's all wrong... but... I have to be fair. The Avatar's supposed to be fair.* "And Shidan's a great name, and he's here, and people were getting hurt. So... he was responsible, too." He gulped, and glanced at the firebender. "But it's still wrong! Killing's not the answer! It never is!"

Now Katara looked like he'd dumped the catfish-eels in *her* stomach. "But... that's the point!" She jabbed a finger toward gold-edged red. "He killed her, Aang. He didn't see us fight! She could have been anybody! And he just *killed* her!"

Huh? Aang tried not to scratch his head in confusion. Hama had been alive, and now she was dead. And Shidan had killed her. Why did it matter *who* she was?

Shidan was looking at both of them like they'd been hitting the cactus juice. "I have walked the aftermath of more bending battles than you have seasons, waterbender. Likely more than all of you *together*. Your brother and friend's tracks scrawled through dust and mud; they were the controlled, not the controllers. You had not been present in this town long enough - you had not *lived* long enough - to have been responsible for the corpses I found in that cave. And you are Water Tribe, and no true woman of the Water Tribes would have let such evil slip away undealt-with. Who else could she have been?"

"But you didn't *know*!" Katara raised a hand, slowly dragged it back down. "She could have been *any* old lady! She could have been someone's grandmother! You didn't know she was the monster!"

Which still didn't make *sense*, Aang thought, bewildered. Why were people worried about who Shidan had killed? It didn't matter who! Hama was a *person*, not a monster!

"Katara," Toph started.

Shidan tapped toes on the ground. "No. She is correct. I did not know. In battle, one does not always *know*. There is no *time*. But the odds, Katara... Your battle was scourged across the forest. Your foe, we knew, could grasp any of Fire with but a movement. You were free, and your friends - but none of you are Fire, are you? I had one instant to strike. One chance, to slay the monster who would not only kill me, but my grandchildren, my *deshi*! How could I risk it? How could I hesitate, and kill us all?" His breath caught. "I love my family, young one. Perhaps you cannot believe it of Fire; and knowing what Fire has stolen from you, I understand. But I do love them. And I will kill for them."

Deshi, Aang thought, as Katara looked away. Gyatso had used that word before. Kuzon had. It meant- "You have *students*? Real students?"

Now Sokka looked like someone had hit him over the head. Why?

Shidan cocked his head; a movement that poked at Aang's brain. He'd seen somebody look at him that way before. Somewhere. "I have those who follow me in the way of the blade, yes. Daisho are not a common choice for swordsmen here, but Byakko does favor them, and the way they demand." Another tilt of that pale gaze. "But who in the world told you *deshi* meant *student*?"

"Master Gyatso," Aang shrugged. "When I was little, he said that was the best way to explain. If I ever got lost here. Just find one of the Home Guard and tell them I was Master Gyatso's deshi, and everything would be okay." But it hadn't worked, had it? He had to swallow a lump in his throat. "How... how can you teach someone how to live with a sword? That just seems... wrong." He hadn't wanted to say anything while Sokka was learning from Piandao. Sokka couldn't bend; he needed *something* to help him if they got in a fight. And besides, if parents were like teachers, then Sokka already had Chief Hakoda. He might learn how to use a sword from Piandao, but he wouldn't learn how to *live* a way his dad wouldn't approve of. Right?

Shidan regarded Aang a moment. *Hmphed*. "The best swords stay in their sheaths."

Aang blinked at him. "That's a riddle, right?"

"You are a riddle," Shidan said dryly. "But part of it begins to become clear. You use *student* to mean deshi. But deshi does not mean student. It means *disciple*. Apprentice. One who hunts to your guidance."

Gyatso had told him to say *that*? Aang felt a rush of horror. "Air Nomads don't hunt anything!"

"Then say it is one who follows in your path, and for whom you are responsible, as if you were the head of his clan." Shidan spread empty hands. "It is no less true. Naming you his deshi gave you protection among us, far more than your year-mates would have had. A deshi implies a sensei; one who will be responsible for him, and held to account for his mistakes. With that word Gyatso dulled our teeth, so you never felt the full bite of a great name's anger. Clever man." He drew in a breath as if to say more. Glanced at Aang again, and shook his head.

Why did he get the feeling Shidan thought Gyatso had been *too* clever?

That doesn't make sense. How can it be wrong to keep people from getting hurt?

And how could it be right for Katara to say Hama *had* to die? The dark wind came; Gyatso had told them that. But winds went *away*. "Why didn't... why didn't we just heal her?" Aang blurted out. "She wasn't just angry. She was *alone*. She was sick. We should have-"

"Aang." Katara's voice was strained and painful. "*Stop it.*"

Warm fur behind him, Aang stared at her.

"I couldn't have helped her." Katara's fingers were knotted together, knuckles white. "Maybe, *maybe* Yugoda could have. But what she did, what she was doing... Gran-Gran told us the legends. If someone - if they feel the Cold Ones pushing them, making them *want* to do things... maybe you can still save them. But even if they make it - it's better for the tribe if they just go north. Where the sun never goes away again." Fingers flexed. Clenched again, firelight casting shadows across the knot of her hands. "If they've already killed, if they're that far gone... all you can do is end it."

"You mean-" Aang shook his head. How could they say that? How could they even think it?

"Killing people is wrong! Killing *sick* people, it's-" He flung up his hands in frustration. "It's worse than wrong! It's horrible!"

"Well, sometimes I'm horrible!"

Ears still ringing from her shout, Aang couldn't take his eyes off her. She couldn't have said that. She couldn't *believe* it. Not *Katara*.

"You're not horrible," Sokka said firmly. "Protecting the tribe isn't horrible. Sometimes you have to

do something awful. That's not horrible. That's just - sometimes life *sucks*."

Sokka too? Aang turned to Toph. Earth was all straightforward, level; she had to have a better answer-

"Don't look at me, Twinkletoes," Toph shrugged. "Mansion, remember? I dunno what we do with crazy people. Bad guys get put in jail, sure. But Hama already got out of one of those. What else were we gonna do? Tie her up and never let her near water again, like the Fire Nation? Load her up on Appa and drop her in the Earth Kingdom? No thanks! We've got enough crazy guys over there already, with the Fire Army running around setting stuff on fire." She paused. "Um. No offense, Grandpa."

"None taken." Teeth glinted in Shidan's smile. "I have read reports of your group's travels. I know much of what you have encountered. And who."

"But death isn't the answer!" Aang insisted. "Death is *never* the answer."

"Your actions at the Northern Air Temple," Shidan said dryly, sharp nails catching flecks of gold as he stirred the flames, "say otherwise."

"That's not fair!" He could still remember masses of metal falling into icy clouds. "You said you were Kuzon's friend!"

"Ah. And my friendship with Kuzon is supposed to change the reality of your actions?" Shidan blinked at him, cold as a cat-gator staring up from swampy water. "My apologies. I had thought Monk Gyatso taught as did Fire Sage Gentaku of old; that good done in the name of evil is still good, and evil acts, even if done for the holiest sage, are still evil." Another slow, chilling blink. "You killed to protect the folk of the Northern Air Temple. I killed to protect those I hold dear. How is that different?"

Finally, something he could answer. "We weren't being selfish," Aang shot back.

Hitomi bristled; Aang could have sworn he saw hair rising on the back of her neck. "Not *selfish*? That you could even *think*-!"

Shidan held up a hand. "The Elders' teachings, Hitomi. Attachments to things of this world are forbidden. So by his ways, he speaks the truth. To strike in defense of a stranger? Forgivable. To strike in defense of those you care for - is attachment. And so it is *evil*."

Urk. "I didn't say that," Aang protested, seeking Katara's blue, hurt gaze. "I didn't! You fight for people you care about. That's okay! You fight for people you don't care about too, all the time..." And why didn't that sound as good as it had in his head?

Well. He knew whose fault that was. Aang glared at Shidan. "How can you twist everything like this?"

Shidan arched one white brow. "I believe humans call the technique *logic*."

Aang turned green. Oh no. Not that. "That's for old people!"

"Logic," Shidan stated, "is for anyone who hopes to live long enough to grow old. One cannot live by instinct and emotion alone. That way leads to decapitating annoying people, and ruining stray rugs."

Okay. This was officially worse than trying to talk to Guru Pathik, or even Bumi in a cryptic mood.

"What *are* you?"

"A dutiful son of the Father of Fire," Shidan replied. Paused a moment, as if thinking. "Well, not wholly dutiful. Which is just as well. Agni has been very upset with the last two Avatars, and one who followed his will more rigidly might give you far less rope. Though I suspect less, in the long run, might be less cruel than more. Do you believe a Fire Sage would know the rules and punishments which bind a criminal of Fire?"

Aang rolled his eyes. "What has that got to do with-"

"Do you believe it?" Shidan challenged him.

"A Fire Sage like Shiyu? Sure," Aang answered. "The other guys were working for the Fire Lord. I wouldn't trust *anything* they say."

"Discerning," Shidan nodded. "Would you, then, believe the Elders would know how to deal with a prank gone awry among the boys of your Temple?"

"Of course they would!" Aang shot back, frustrated. "Why won't you just answer my question?"

"Because the questions you ask shape the answer you seek," Shidan said bluntly. "You trust those of good heart who know Fire to deal with Fire, and so you trust Air to deal with Air. Why do you not trust Water to judge Water?"

Darn it, now he was getting mad. "Why are you making this about me?" Aang demanded. "Hama was *sick*-"

"Yes, she was ill," Shidan cut him off. "She was also *evil*. And evil must be dealt with, before it can destroy all we hold dear. You, Avatar Aang, *Air Monk* Aang, have three choices. You may learn to deal with evil. You may stand aside, and allow others to slay it. Or you may stand between true evil and those of us who would fight to stop it, and watch the world burn."

Aang tried not to shiver. "That's not the only answer! It can't be!" He had to breathe. Just - breathe. "Gyatso said you could talk to *anybody*!"

Shidan eyed him, kind of like a saber-moose lion deciding whether to bite first or just stomp the annoyance into icky goo. Muttered something under his breath that sounded *kind* of like, "Bring a rabbiroo back to the nest, can't expect a cub to kill it the first time..."

Which made no sense whatsoever. What did Shidan think he was?

"Aang." Sokka's voice didn't waver. But blue eyes narrowed with a determination that made Aang just a little uneasy. "I wish you were right, that talking fixed everything. I really, really wish you were. But we tried talking to Hama. We were with her a whole day. She knew two of us were Water Tribe; she knew we had a way to get into the Fire Nation. Which means she knew we had a way to get out. If she wanted to get away from the war, if all she wanted was to go *home* - all she had to do was ask us."

"Maybe she was too scared to ask," Aang shot back. "Maybe she knew you'd figure out she ran away. And she was scared, and she just couldn't!"

"This *isn't* about you."

Aang almost jumped into a defensive stance. Sokka... Sokka sounded *angry*. Not just mad, in a who-ate-the-blubber-jerky way. *Angry*.

"Hama was *killing* people." Sokka was breathing slow, like it hurt to; looking aside, past the flames. "We tried to talk to her. You tried to talk to her. She *knew it was wrong*. She was killing people because she could. Because she liked it. Because nobody knew how to stop her!" A low, hissed exhalation. "We stopped her. Maybe you don't like how we did it. Maybe *none* of us liked killing her, Aang, did you think about that? Because whatever she did, she used to be a person. And now she's dead, and she can't ever make up for what she did. That's one of the most horrible things I can think of. But there's something I can think of that's worse."

Now he looked at Aang, and the airbender had to brace himself not to flinch. He didn't know what was in that look, but something about it made him just want to pull the covers over his head. It *hurt*.

"There is something worse," Sokka said, voice low. "If we hadn't stopped her, she would have kept right on killing." He stopped. Shook his head. "Aang. We didn't *want* to kill her. I bet even Shidan didn't. He's a swordsman, like Master Piandao. And real swordsmen *don't want to kill*."

What?

"To take a life is the gravest burden a soul can bear," Shidan said quietly. "A doused flame can be lit once more. A seared tapestry can be rewoven. But a lost life?" He sighed. "Even if a soul passes through the realm of death to be reborn, that life is over. That person is gone. The greatest of swordsmen pray they *never* draw their blades."

The best swords stay in their sheaths. It was a riddle. Like Gyatso's, about how the best bender didn't need to bend the wind; he was already where it was blowing...

"We didn't want to kill her," Sokka repeated. "But she didn't give us a choice."

He heard what Sokka was saying. Every word. But even if you knew it was a riddle... it didn't make *sense*. Master Gyatso had always said that *no one* could make you do what you didn't want to do.

But he could still see the tears streaking Katara's face in the moonlight, as she *made* Hama stop bending them. Pale, and gleaming white, like the skulls around Master Gyatso...

Gyatso wouldn't want to hurt anybody. Ever.

But he had. Which meant...

Gyatso was wrong.

It was like saying the sun was going to start rising in the west. That fire was going to be cold, and the Water Tribe was going to take up mining. It just *didn't happen*.

"Gyatso said no one could make you do what you didn't want to," Aang mumbled into fur. "He was wrong. How could he be wrong?"

"Aang?" Katara's voice was still a little rough from crying. "Are you okay?"

"No!" Didn't they understand? Didn't they feel the world falling apart? "Monk Gyatso was a *master*. He stood up to the Elders! They never would have let him if he was wrong!"

Silence from his friends. He really, really hated those silences. What did they think he'd said now?

"That accords with the tales Byakko tells of the Air Temples," Hitomi said, fiddling with the

teapot. "Dissent was... discouraged. Strongly."

"Say it plainly, young lady," Shidan said gruffly. "Or I will. I have little to fear from Avatars, beyond stupidity. The Temples taught *one* Way. Xiangchen's Way. All else was suspect at best, and eliminated at worst."

Oh, no way was he going to sit still for *that*. Aang shot away from Appa's side, glaring at the not-a-spirit. "Air Nomads were peaceful! We never hurt *anybody*!"

"Pacifistic, yes. You were that." Shidan sipped the tea Hitomi had served him. "But as I have difficulty grasping the words human take for granted, I make a practice of studying them all. And there are layers and layers of *harm*, young monk." He eyed his cup ruefully. "One does not suppose you could have made it stronger?"

Feet tucked under her, the merchant gave Shidan a sidelong glance. "Lord Shidan. Everyone knows you like it strong enough to strip paint. I'm not going to inflict that on innocent youngsters."

"No?" Shidan's whiskers drooped, woeful.

Hitomi lifted her chin, unflinching. "Lady Kotone *warns* us about you, my lord."

"Ah. I suppose someone must." Shidan regarded his tea. "There is harm, Aang, and there is *harm*. Your people were peaceful, in body." He nodded toward Katara. "But what harm did Hama do her, last night?"

Around the fire, Katara and Sokka both looked at Shidan as if he'd lost his mind. Toph cracked her knuckles and leaned back against a rock that hadn't been there three seconds ago. "Oh, I gotta hear this one," the earthbender muttered.

"Are you serious?" Aang got out. "You were *there*! You saw what happened!"

"So I was; and so I did see what *I* would call harm, and hurt," Shidan said dryly, setting his tea down. "Four hurts of humans I know; to the body, the heart, the mind, and the spirit. But I have been other places beyond the Fire Nation. Including your Temple, long ago. And there were those among your Elders who would. Not. Consider. Katara. *Hurt*."

No. No no no, that didn't make *sense*, his people weren't *anything* like Hama-!

Shidan snarled as wind rushed and fire flared, hands clapping together in one swift *crack*-

The fire blew out.

Pale gold glared at Aang, hot as the embers. "Did Jeong Jeong teach you nothing?"

Aang squinted at him, heart still racing. "He wanted me to learn how to breathe. I already know how to breathe!"

Shidan snorted. "Obviously, he should have started with something more basic."

Aang blew out a breath. "What's more basic than *breathing*?"

"Putting fires *out*."

Aang realized his tongue was getting dry. Closed his mouth, still stunned. Every firebender he'd seen *started* fires. Put them out? That was waterbending, or maybe earthbending. Even airbending, if you timed the wind right to steal air from the fire.

Firebenders learn to put fires out?

"Jeong Jeong kind of skipped that," Sokka put in. "Maybe you could-?"

"Part of me wishes I could," Shidan mused. "But I cannot. What I am... *cannot* teach an Avatar firebending. The Avatar Spirit chose to take human form to learn from humans. He who bears it must learn bending from humans, as well."

"That's not true," Aang protested, patting fur. "I learned all kinds of things from Appa!"

"Be that as it may. *I* am not one you would wish for your teacher," Shidan stated. "I doubt I would be able to forget the many, *many* times you have tried to kill my grandchildren." A fluid shrug. "Of course, my granddaughter was indeed trying to kill you. I harbor you no ill will, not for that. But I am fond of her, and that would not do your training any good at all."

Erk?

"You like Azula?" Sokka squeaked, eyes wide in disbelief.

"She is my granddaughter," Shidan observed.

"Um." Toph screwed up her face. "You know she tried to kill Sparky, right?"

"Several times," Shidan agreed. "I did not say *I approved* of her." He paused. "But she is clan, and she has done many things worthy of admiration. Not least of which is surviving her father in the first place. He wanted another son."

Now his brain really hurt. "You feel sorry for *Azula*?" Aang exclaimed. "She's crazy!" He pointed at the firebender, determined. "And I never tried to kill her! Or Zuko! No matter what they did!"

The red-and-blue haori stirred; a slight shrug. "My grandson says otherwise."

"And you *believe* him?" Aang shot back. "The first time we met him, he lied!"

A white brow went up. "Did he?"

"Of course he did!" Aang glared back. Why did Shidan believe Zuko instead of the good guys? "He was threatening Katara's whole village, and he didn't *want* to-"

Oh. Monkeyfeathers.

It was like falling forever, and the wind wouldn't catch you. Like one of the trick picture-scrolls Gyatso laughed at; where if you looked one way it was a vase, but another, it was faces...

"He didn't want to hurt anyone," Aang managed. "But... he *would* have."

"To find you? To end his exile? To finally earn his father's love, and prevent Azula from taking the throne? Oh yes." Shidan nodded, matter-of-fact. "My grandson is born of Sozin's line as well as mine. Violence is bred in us all, blood and bone. He was raised on tales of death and bloody victory, and the gentlest soul he clung to, the man who stood as his father for three long years - is *the Dragon of the West*. Sear a village to the ground? Zuko would have hated it, and himself. He *would* have done it." Still seated, Shidan gave Aang a slight bow. "I am grateful you spared him that."

"People can do things they hate." Aang hugged himself, colder than the doused fire. "Then... how does anybody know what's true?"

"We do a lot of guessing," Sokka said wryly.

"You guess?" Aang felt queasy, like he'd tried to ride a log in the middle of a hurricane. "You *guess* when people are telling the truth?" He felt like pulling one of Toph's tricks, and banging his head against a rock. "No wonder everybody's fighting!" Wait. Wait, wait, wait, if *that* was true, then- "If everybody has to guess what's true, and all people know is what the Fire Lord says you can teach in school - then - even if we explain what's really been happening, they're not going to believe we came to help?"

Hitomi held her head in her hands.

"We're going to show up with an invasion," Sokka said dryly, "with the Avatar they're all scared to death of, on the worst day of their lives. No. They are not going to think we came to help, Aang. They're going to think the way Zuko thought, the way he did for *years*, until he chased us across the world and got a chance to see we weren't like what everyone taught him. To see the Fire Lord was *wrong*. They're going to think we're the bad guys, we came to kill them all, and we did it on-" He stopped. Groaned. Smacked himself in the forehead, and glared down at embers as if he could flare them up by pure will. "They know we're coming, don't they."

"If you mean the eclipse," Shidan mused, "then, yes. They do."

Aang froze. *Say what?*

Chapter End Notes

Shuten Douji, or the tale of the drunken demon, is a Japanese folktale; I found a rather gruesome translation (at least PG-13, and probably R!) in the Journal of Asian Studies. That specific translation can be found at:

[.jp\(/publications/afs/pdf/\)](#)

Warning, that's a large file, over 9 MB. This and a bunch of other neat articles can be found at:

[.jp\(/\)](#)

In my experience, 12-year-olds have a love-hate relationship with logic. They love it when they can use it to rules-lawyer themselves into being technically in the right by way of loopholes in whatever you told them not to do. They hate it when you use it to prove they have to do something they don't want to. Then, it's cheating.

The concepts Aang is trying to grasp here are really, really hard. Necessary violence is a matter of serious debate among adults; a sheltered kid is not going to figure it out in a day. Or even a few weeks. Add to that "what is evil", "what is truth", and "what is the duty of someone who sees evil occurring" - oh yeah. Aang is trying. But he wasn't raised with predators, a hunting culture, or even semi-regular contact with armed forces. Everyone else sitting around that fire was. (Yes, even Toph. That mansion had guards, which implies they did have weapons training, and Toph would have been acquainted with the idea they might use it.) This is cultural conflict at about the most basic level. The idea that sometimes, something needs to die, is a fact of life... to everyone but Aang. Aang is running into the problem he tangled with in canon right

before Sozin's Comet. Only at this point, it's a much more immediate problem... and he doesn't have Fire to help him with confronting problems.

Aang believes - truly believes - that violence is never the right solution. His problem is the same one a lot of young teenagers have: he hasn't sat down to wrestle with the consequences of his beliefs. And they exist. (Boy, do they ever.) What he needs - really needs - is time to think, and an adult of his own culture to help him figure out why he thinks that way, and what he's willing to sacrifice to hold true to his beliefs.

...I'm working on it. (Wry Grin.)

Chapter 61

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"What do you mean, the Fire Nation *knows they're coming?*"

What she said, Teo thought, too stunned to speak as he watched Healer Amaya try to glare down the prince. He didn't look much like a prince; robes brown as Auntie Changchang's best garden soil, traveling sandals, blue and red cords tying back part of his hair while the rest drifted over his scar.

Then again, Amaya's courtyard didn't look like any of his storybooks of royal courts, either. Even if the engineer in him was more impressed by its existence than he would have been by any walls covered with gold and silk.

They just carved it right out of the valley wall.

Weeks ago, there'd been a scree slope here steep enough to make a cricket-mouse cry. Now it was terraced and growing green, bushes and herbs soaking up summer sun. Amaya's clinic stood behind it, shaped half in and half out of solid stone, wide windows welcoming enough light to the front rooms to make you feel like you were barely inside at all. Only one of those windows had any glass, a kind of crazy-quilt of stone and wavy pieces that made it look like you were underwater. But as a promise for the future, it was awesome.

And they hadn't stopped with stone and gardens. The little stream that had helped make this slope unstable was now running through Amaya's garden, and others; he could see the bright blue of oogami-nut flowers sprouting up everywhere.

Auntie says they're already getting first crops of greens and - whatever they call all those weird tuber-things. I didn't know anyone could grow stuff that fast.

Which, Changchang had told him before, was why he flew and built things, instead of trying to coax food out of the ground. This time, he didn't even mind when she'd rolled her eyes at wind-happy youngsters. She'd looked down the slopes at growing hedgerows and gardens, traded some of their mountain pluots for a thick spicy stew of - well, he wasn't going to ask, it was warm, red, and chewy, and had something like beans and clams and tomato-carrots in it-

She'd just looked so *relieved*. Even as they both grabbed for buttered bread to damp the fire in their mouths.

So maybe it was good that they were here, even if he hadn't wanted to come down to Dragons' Wings in the first place. But after that last crash, when a thermal had just gone wrong-

Auntie Changchang's a worrywart. I'm going to be fine. Not like a broken leg makes a difference.

Hurt; sure, it hurt. And it was going to hurt, no matter how well it was splinted. What was the big deal?

But she was worried. And he wanted to know what these crazy people were doing to the winds.

It's something they're doing to the volcano. How can doing something to the earth change the wind?

He wanted to know. If they were going to be neighbors, and so far Zuko's people seemed just as stubborn as the mountains, he wanted to know what kind of people they were flying over. If letting Auntie drag him to the healers gave him a chance to hear what people were really thinking - hey, two chicken-pigs, one stone.

So they'd showed up for healing. And apparently rolled right into the middle of the worst argument he'd seen since the rest of the Temple found out what his dad had been hiding behind airbender locks.

If he keeps this up, she's going to throw boiling water right in his face.

Well... maybe that pool some odd earthbender had shaped into Amaya's courtyard, away from the stream, wasn't actually boiling. But it was steaming, and no matter how many times Amaya had told both of them it was for healing, he knew Auntie was just as dubious as he was about going anywhere near it. Or that ominous, thin-stone charcoal brazier. The older woman would much rather have been inside, where there was a cool-water well, and stone walls strong as the bones of the earth.

No thanks. If I can't be up the mountain, I at least want to be out where I can see the sky. Even if the brazier is kind of freaky. Teo gripped a wheel, watching Changchang as much as the pile of unlit charcoal and the two benders. If she thought it was dangerous, he was wheeling out of here.

Perched on a stone bench, Changchang worked needles through the rows of her knitting.

"What do I mean?" Zuko looked honestly confused. "I mean we can talk about it now. They're almost there. Any spies who might be here-"

"Spies?"

"-won't have time to deliver a report... what?" Zuko backed off a step, remaining eyebrow scrunched down in what looked like bewilderment. "What'd I say?"

Stern and slender in blue, Amaya planted hands on her hips and shook her head. "Spies? Zuko. You *know* these people."

"I knew everyone on the *Wani*, too," Zuko shrugged. "Never stopped Azula from giving me a mutiny for my birthday."

Teo blinked.

Amaya stopped for a breath. Let it out slowly. "Why you wanted her alive, I have no idea... Your crew attacked you? With the Dragon of the West on board?"

"Not Captain Jee's crew," Zuko said quickly. "But the two years before that... I was supposed to be in command of the ship. If I couldn't handle them... Uncle would have made sure I got out alive." He waved it off. "Master Amaya. Just because we know people, doesn't mean we know everyone they know. Or everyone who can be used against them. Everybody has left someone they cared about. Either in the Earth Kingdom or the Fire Nation. We've *got* spies. I just don't know who all of them are yet."

"You..." Amaya looked up, imploring the skies. "What do I do with you?"

"Help me fix the nice gliders so they can poke around here and make sure we're not planning to blow them up?" Zuko suggested. He gave Teo a wry smile. "Don't worry. Your dad's with Chief Hakoda. He's survived two years raiding Fire Nation territories. He knows what he's doing."

Teo poked himself in the chest, hard enough to feel it. Nope, not dreaming. Too bad. If this was a nightmare, he'd really like to wake up now. "The *Fire Nation* knows my dad's - wait a minute! How do you know where my dad went?"

"A guy who designs war machines shuts himself up with Chief Hakoda, carves up a whole captured ship, and won't let anybody see what he's doing with the pieces?" *Duh*, said Zuko's tone. "Next time you talk to him, tell him he needs to at least *think* about using a cover story. Like... I don't know, building a big metal cistern to catch snowmelt for when you need it. Or something."

The worst thing about it, Teo decided, was how Zuko talked like it all made sense. "How does the Fire Nation know my dad's coming?"

Zuko was giving him a Look. "Azula was in the Earth King's palace."

Oh. Oh, Teo *knew* that look. He'd seen it on Dad. Usually just before someone poked at something that was about to blow up. "I hate to say this," Teo managed, trying not to strangle the words, "but pretend I don't know anything, and *start from the beginning*."

"The beginning?" Zuko said warily. "Um. Well, Azula's always been good at manipulating people, ever since the time she got the servants away to try smothering me when she was six..."

They're insane, Teo thought, mouth hanging open. *They're all nuts*.

"Not that far back, young man." Changchang finished a row, looped yarn to start another. "How did the Fire Princess get into the Earth King's palace?"

"Oh." Zuko nodded, a little less glum. "That was easy. She caught some Kyoshi Warriors, stole their gear, and then she, Mai, and Ty Lee just showed up at the Outer Wall and said they were the Avatar's allies. According to Mai and the Dai Li," Zuko shook his head, "Sokka didn't even go down to check who they were. Just ordered them to be let in." The firebender snorted. "For a guy who's used disguises to get people in and out of places all over the Earth Kingdom, that was stupid."

"Still not explaining," Teo got out.

Zuko frowned, then nodded. "Chief Hakoda didn't mention where Sokka made his big plan?"

Huh?

"In the palace, I assume," Changchang sighed. Worked her shoulders a bit under her shawl, and gave Teo a fond, rueful smile. "I have distant cousins who've worked for great lords. Servants know *everything*."

"Servants?" Amaya said, startled. "But they were making-"

"Secret plans," Teo chimed in.

"*Sure* they were." Zuko's scarred smirk made the hair stand up on Teo's neck. "Which takes time. All day, all night, all week... And these were *Earth Kingdom* generals. Nobles. I know Uncle Iroh doesn't act like it, but nobles aren't supposed to raid the pantry when they get hungry. They send somebody else to do it. Someone who has to walk in, politely present everything, pour the tea, and be grandly dismissed. Which takes time. A lot of time." A wry shrug. "Plenty of time to look at a map. Or a timeline. Or the exact date of an eclipse."

Teo felt like he had when a wind had gone out from under him, and everything ahead was ice and

razor-edged rock. *Oh, this is going to hurt.*

"So Azula could have gotten everything she needed from the servants," Zuko went on. "Only she didn't have to, because the Earth King and his generals were *so thrilled* with sharing the details of the great plan with their allies, the Kyoshi Warriors. After all, they were the *Avatar's* allies. And if the Avatar liked what he heard - well. Maybe he'd be a little less attached to this silly idea of leaving any of the Fire Nation alive." He growled under his breath. "Damn it, Gyatso. You taught him bending. Couldn't you have given him *one* book on politics?"

Teo swallowed, and tried to hang onto the important details. "You know about the eclipse."

And Zuko was giving him another Look. "Your father has a miniature orrery in his office."

"Well, I guess," Teo said, taken aback. "But that's just a... toy..." *Oh no.*

"Orrery?" Amaya asked.

Zuko sketched swirling orbits in air. "It's a kind of planetarium. It shows how the earth and moon move around the sun. And other planets, too."

"Put a candle in for the sun, you can watch the shadows," Teo said numbly. "It's not a toy."

"A little one is," Zuko admitted. "You need a bigger one. And a lot of abacuses."

Teo winced, the mention of calculating devices making the next step obvious. "You can *predict* eclipses."

"Down to when and where, pretty close," Zuko said dryly. "Eclipses means no firebending. Sozin's Comet means *lots* of fires. We've *always* watched the sky."

Gaah. "My dad's going into a trap?" Teo demanded, heart racing. "And you didn't say anything?"

"It's not a trap if you know it's coming-"

"How could they *possibly* know it's coming?" Amaya loomed like a thundercloud, one hand waving a slow circle that churned steaming water. "Of all the dishonorable, underhanded... when your uncle finds out about this-!"

Zuko stood unmoving as stone, good eye narrowed. "What do you mean, *finds out* about it?" he bit out. "Uncle knows Azula was in the palace. He questioned Mai. You don't think she'd tell *me* what my sister was up to, do you? I'm competition for the heir. Uncle's already passed over, so he's not."

Amaya seemed to draw in on herself. "Iroh knows Chief Hakoda is sailing into a trap?"

Zuko spread bewildered, empty hands. "Because it's *obvious*?"

Steaming water crackled into ice.

Silent, Zuko watched her, pale gold never wavering.

Turning on her heel, Amaya stalked inside.

Teo started at the sound of doors slamming, one after the other. First one had to be the back door; the next - the street? "I think you'd better warn your uncle."

"Warn him?" Zuko flung up his hands, indignant. "What did I *say*?"

I don't believe this. "You said you set my dad up to get *killed!*" Teo rocked his chair forward; never mind a little broken leg. He knew all kinds of things his wheels could do.

"*What?*"

It was the shock that stopped Teo, before he ran over Zuko's toes. That wasn't a *how dare you*, much less *how dare you see through my lies*. It was... honest surprise. *Hurt*.

"I would *never-!*" Knuckles clenched white, Zuko slowly breathed out, loosening a finger at a time. "Teo. If I ever wanted to kill your father, I'd do it *myself*."

Oh shit. Angry firebender, wood and bamboo wheels-

But Auntie wasn't moving. Why?

"You don't believe the Fire Nation can be good people," Zuko bit out. "Fine. I can live with that. So I won't tell you I would never do that because we're good people, we're neighbors, and good neighbors don't kill each other. But even if we're not good people, even if we're all the horrible, evil things the Earth Kingdom says we are, killing your father would be stupid." A snarling breath. "I *hate* stupid."

That sounded sincere. In a really weird way.

But you can lie without ever saying something that's not true. "So you just sent him off to *get* killed," Teo challenged the firebender.

"I *did not!*" Zuko gave him a glare that trickled sweat down the glider's neck. "I told you. Chief Hakoda's *good*. And Sokka's not dumb... most of the time. If they're going to sail into Fire Lord Ozai's trap on purpose, they've got a plan." He smirked. "And an ambushed ambush? Trust me. That's a *very* bad day."

"But- you-" Teo sputtered, trying to find words to express the sheer *wrongness* of this conversation.

Changchang dropped a stitch, and clucked to herself as she bent to unsnarl the mess. "My hearing isn't what it used to be, young man... are you saying you didn't warn the Water Tribe chief because you thought he already knew?"

"Right." Zuko let out a breath, relieved. "As long as Azula's spies didn't hear anyone discussing the eclipse, she wouldn't know that we knew that *she* knew."

"...Is that even a sentence?" Teo said weakly.

"To a noble?" Changchang chuckled. "Ho-ho, it's barely a start."

"But it's too late for good intel to get there now, so we can talk about it," Zuko went on. "Your dad didn't tell you about the plan? Ouch. I mean," he added hastily, "you don't want plans getting out, so you don't tell anyone you don't have to, but... I know that hurts."

Teo rubbed his forehead, trying to think. Zuko felt sorry for him, after he'd-

Wait a minute. What did Auntie say - oh. Oh, wow.

"Let me see if I've got this," Teo said, amazed how calm he sounded. It was kind of like trying to follow Dad on one of his sideways new ideas. A little. "There's going to be an eclipse, and the Fire

Nation knows about it. They've known about it for a *while*."

"I knew about it before I got exiled," Zuko nodded. "Uncle and I planned to make sure we were north or south of it. Or maybe west. It's probably not going to start too much farther east than Omashu..." For the first time, Zuko looked hesitant. "Um. You do know an eclipse doesn't hit the whole world, right?"

"No," Teo admitted, dazed. "No, I didn't know that... it's not going to happen here?"

"We'll probably get part of the shadow. It won't be fun," Zuko admitted. "But the sun won't be blocked all the way. Not this far north."

"Got it." Okay; scratch some of the wilder guys' ideas to maybe use the eclipse if people here turned nasty. Ouch. "So you know about the eclipse. And... Sokka found out about it."

"How he found out, I have no idea," Zuko said darkly. "The great names have to know. But that someone would let word get out of the Fire Nation-"

"He said it was a spirit," Teo got out in a rush. Which, okay, everyone said the Avatar was supposed to deal with the spirit world. It just seemed... surreal. Wind and gears and equal and opposite reactions, those he understood. Spirits felt like the world was cheating, somehow.

"A spirit." Zuko's voice went very quiet. "Of. Course. Let me guess. Did any of them think, just for one minute, the spirits might have been *lying*?"

Teo's jaw dropped. "But - you say there *is* an eclipse-"

"You can lie and lie, and never say anything that isn't true."

Which was just what he'd been thinking. *Creepy*.

Zuko's hands fisted, sparks flickering at the knuckles. "Azula's an *expert* at it. And damn it, she's been chasing them for months. I warned them. *Uncle* warned them. They know that!" He held a breath; blew out steam and took another. "*Which* spirit?"

"They said it was - Wan Shi Tong?" Teo stammered. "Chief Hakoda laughed about how he'd have to change his name, he knew Ten Thousand and One Things now..."

Zuko went gray.

Changchang stopped knitting. "That bad, is it?"

"He's allied with-" Zuko waved a hand toward the harbor. "With the spirit who sent the drowned."

Auntie winced. "That bad, indeed."

"Seaman Saburo," Zuko was muttering. "Captain Jee - hawks - Agni, no time..." Cradling his head in his hands, he breathed in. Held it. Breathed out. "Jee first. He'll have ideas. They have to come by water - well, unless Toph makes a really big, *really* deep tunnel - no. Too much magma. Toph's not that stupid. She won't let Aang be. Spirits, why even bother, Hakoda won't listen when I'm standing right in front of him, all a letter's going to do is get him and Katara madder. and if they're mad at *me* they're not going to think about the *firebenders* in front of them, the Home Guard, the *kill zones*..."

"What's a kill zone?" Teo asked, dreading the answer.

Gold blinked at him, as if remembering he was there. "It's - control your enemy, *make* them move-" Words seemed to get tangled up; Zuko shook his head in frustration. Held up one finger. Deliberately turned his hand, and jabbed it toward innocent ground. Turned on his heel, and stalked into the clinic.

"Hmm. And what do you think that meant?" Changchang raised gray brows at him.

How am I supposed to know? But sometimes, up in the thin air, you didn't have the voice to yell. "Stay here. I think. So *why* are we staying, he could start burning stuff any minute-"

Changchang *hmp*ed. "I seem to remember one young man breaking a few things, the last time one of his glider designs went wrong."

Um. Yeah. But he'd been a *lot* younger. He hadn't done anything like that in a year. And... damn, sometimes he forgot how fast people with two good legs could move. Zuko was back with a sand tray and a scoop for water, setting the tray on Auntie's bench so they could get a good look as he molded damp sand.

Flat part's the water, Teo thought, *there's the bay, the volcano, the Temple...* "What is that?" He pointed toward a thin rim of sand on the "water", completing the arc of the valley.

"Caldera edge. Shallow. First water zone." Zuko's voice was rough, tumbling words together like a rubble wall. "Ship has to get over it. That's where you mine." He barely touched the sand shaping the harbor entrance. "Second zone. Ships have to get through. Projectile weapons dug in here, here. Mines, nets down here - keep people from landing." A wave of fingers toward sketched docks. "Third zone. Tactics vary. Might have traps in the water. Might wait, until they land; shake the dock apart. Or torch it. Tar *burns*."

Teo shivered at the thought. But-

"It's... like what we did at the Temple." Teo glanced at Auntie. "First we tried to knock them off the trail. Then we tried to keep them from coming up the cliffs. Then..." He swallowed. "Sokka blew up the gas in the ravine."

Zuko blinked. Took a deep breath. "Good job."

"I didn't like it," Teo admitted, shifting in his chair. "When we beat you everybody was happy, but-"

"Good."

"What?" Teo threw up a hand. "I don't get you guys! You're angry about us killing you, you're happy that we did - what is *wrong* with you?" Oh; oh, that wasn't good at *all*...

"People die in war." Zuko's voice was quiet; cool and matter-of-fact as Changchang's after - after herbs and rest just weren't *enough*. "You killed Fire Nation soldiers. I don't like it. I don't have to like it. You killed them to protect yourselves, your people. That, I understand. Being glad you're alive... Teo. That's not wrong. If you don't start a fight, but you *finish* it - I don't like what you did. The ghosts don't like it, and we have to deal with them. But that's the way life is." He waved at the sand model. "What we'd do is like what you did. Figure out the weak points; the easy ways the enemy can get in. Make sure it's *not* easy." Eyes on Teo, Zuko waited.

Teo glared back. "What has that got to do with my dad-"

Oh. Argh. "They're going to have defenses like this. At the capital." Damn it, he'd just given that

part of the plan away... *Distract him*. "That's not fair! The Fire Nation attacks people. Everybody knows that. You can't defend things, too!"

Zuko gave him a sidelong glance that couldn't be anything but amused. "You should read some of our histories. The Yu Yan can tell you about the time somebody had to shoot at Lord Heian's men so they could *attack* to the *rear*." Humor passed, like sunlight fleeing clouds. "Teo. This is going to be bad. But Chief Hakoda, Sokka - they're good at improvising. If anyone can get people out of this alive, they will."

Teo's eyes stung; he bit his lip. He was *thirteen*, damn it. He was *not* going to bawl in front of a firebender. "You could have stopped them!"

"How?" Zuko didn't sound angry anymore. Just upset, and tired. "How could I have stopped them? If I knew you didn't know - I can't believe they didn't know! - I just-" He stopped. Took a breath to untangle his thoughts. "We would have tried to warn them. But Chief Hakoda won't listen to me."

The weird, *final* way Zuko said that sent shivers down Teo's spine. "You make it sound like it's too late." He thumped a fist on his chair arm. "It's not too late! It's not the eclipse yet!"

"We don't have a sky bison." Zuko set out his words like a roofer would his tiles, fact clicking against fact. "There's not a ship in the world that could get there fast enough, even if they could get through the blockade. A messenger hawk might - *might* - get there in time. *If* the Fire Lord doesn't have falconers with phoenix-eagles hunting for them; he knows we have some. And *if* the hawk got through, they'd still have to read the letter. And believe it. And they *won't* believe it from me."

"Not even Toph?" Teo challenged. He was pretty sure he'd heard Chief Hakoda say good things about the earthbender, even if sometimes they were followed by, *she trusts the Fire Nation too much*.

"She'd believe it." Zuko glanced at the yard's grass and herbs, some of it just starting to thicken up again after earthbenders had shifted slope and stone. "But she'd have to get someone to read it to her. And if the Water Tribe saw the hawk first... I don't like losing birds."

"The Avatar's earthbending teacher can't read?" Teo squinted in disbelief. "What kind of backwoods badger-mole hole did he pull her out of?"

Zuko leveled a look that should have set something on fire. "I understand Lady Bei Fong comes from a prestigious merchant family, and has had the benefit of tutors in the classics. Much of which she has memorized. Which is a notable feat, for one who can never see the light of scholarly illumination, but can only listen for the rustle of its robes as it passes in the night."

Wow. Somebody had their oh-so-noble back up. "And that's supposed to mean?" Teo shot back.

"She's *blind*, you jerk."

Teo rocked back in his chair, stunned. "I didn't... how?" he stammered. "She's a bender!"

"Since when does bending need eyes?" Zuko eyed the chair. "Or legs? Katara can turn me inside-out just using her arms. I've heard rumors King Bumi can bend with his *face*." He waved it off. "I trust Toph. So does Sokka. But Sokka's fifteen. You think a whole invading army is going to listen to him?"

"How old are *you*?" Teo challenged.

"Not the same." Zuko stalked the courtyard, one hand drifting out to touch the cool brazier as he

passed it. "You think my people would listen to me if I said we had to break our promise to Asagitatsu on Chief Arnook's say-so? Wouldn't work-" He stopped dead, frowning.

Changchang lifted her brows, but stayed quiet. Teo bit his tongue and waited. He knew *that* look, too.

I think I've got something. Maybe.

"We don't need a message to Hakoda." Zuko's voice was quiet, tentative; as if he were feeling the idea out, eyes closed. "We need a message to *Mai*."

"*What?*" Teo choked out. "But - you said she was one of the girls who pretended to be a Kyoshi Warrior so the Fire Nation could get into Ba Sing Se-"

"With my sister, and Ty Lee. Right," Zuko nodded. "That *Mai*."

"That *Mai*?" Teo echoed in disbelief. "You want to send a letter to a girl who works with the *Fire Princess* - your sister, who *tried to kill you* - to help my dad?"

"Exactly." Zuko was smirking again, eyes alight with the kind of reckless glee Teo had only seen on Jing and Ke and Sima; the guys (and one stubborn girl) who would jump their gliders off cliffs into *any* weather. Because they knew the wind like he did, and they knew their gliders... and they had what Aang said *he* had. *Spirit*.

"Young man, I haven't heard anything that insane since - spirits, since Ji led us all up here!" Changchang started.

"Auntie." Teo shook his head. "He thinks he can do this." He swallowed. "Why do you think you can do this? She tried to kill you!"

"She had reasons." With an effort, Zuko focused on him. "Teo. Don't... don't judge the Fire Nation by my family. We're crazy."

Teo rolled his eyes. "You can say that again-"

"You're *not listening*."

Changchang was studying the prince, very carefully. "So the rumors are true. The Fire Lords are mad."

Well, sure, Teo thought, exasperated. Everyone knew the Fire Lord was... crazy... His mouth went dry. "You're serious."

"Not crazy the way you're used to," Zuko shrugged. "We know what we're doing, and we know why we're doing it. We just don't always do things for the same reasons everybody else does." He looked straight at Teo. "I don't know what you know about logistics. I don't know what Sokka's plan is. But if he's gotten people close enough to attack the Caldera, there is no way in the world we can get them a message to turn around in time. Which means we've got to attack the problem from the other end."

"The other..." *Think, Teo. Think!* "You want to help after - after everything's gone wrong."

"We don't know everything will go wrong," Zuko said bluntly. "It's going to be the eclipse. Hakoda and Sokka are good." He held up three fingers. "They could win." One finger down. "They could lose, and still be able to retreat." Another finger. "Or - worst case - they could lose, and they *can't*

get away." Fingers clenched in a fist, dropped to his side. "That's where your father could get killed. That's where we need to do something. If we can do anything."

"And you trust this girl Mai." Changchang had her head cocked, making sure her better ear caught every word.

"Yes." Zuko looked a little sheepish. "But she listens to Uncle more than me. I should ask him."

"I'll go rescue him from your aunt," Changchang said dryly. "In the meantime... those two youngsters you sent up to us say you're a healer." She pointed at Teo. "Heal."

Zuko's attention snapped to him. "What's wrong with you?"

"Um." Teo glanced at Auntie. Who looked ready to drag him toward Zuko by main force. Winced as his leg throbbed again. "It's broken?"

Zuko glared at the bit of wood sticking out from under his blanket, and muttered something that made Teo's ears cringe. "Broken. Bad as my marines, I swear..."

"Heh." Knitting tucked up her sleeve and a smile on her face, Changchang strode briskly out of the courtyard.

Don't leave me here alone!

"Don't look like that," Zuko said grumpily, lighting charcoal with a punch of one fist. "I'm not going to eat you."

"Says the guy who just started a fire," Teo shot back.

"Waterbenders heal with water. What did you expect me to use?" Zuko rolled his hands around the flames, like Changchang rolling together a huge sphere of dough. "What hurts, where, and how bad?"

"Uh..." Fire had just shifted in Zuko's hands, yellow to green, gold, and purple that braided around each other like the Northern Lights. "The leg?"

"That's what I thought." Sighing, Zuko brought flame-wreathed hands over toward him-

Oh spirits this is going to hurt-!

"Fire doesn't kill people."

"What?" Teo croaked. Still watching flickering flames.

"In regular fires," Zuko elaborated. "It's not the fire that kills people. Usually. We can pull people out of fires. We *do*. And it's not the burn that kills them. Most of the time." Gold eyes caught his gaze; held it. "It's the air."

"...Huh?"

"Relax. This isn't even going to touch you. Exactly." Flames swept up and down over Teo's splinted leg, warm as a sunburn. "Good. They set it right. Right as they could, anyway. What a mess..." A quiet breath. "Fire doesn't kill people who get caught in it. It's the air."

"The air?" Teo tried not to shiver at warm prickles. "You mean, the fire uses up everything we breathe?"

"That's one way." Zuko spoke in the pause between passes, as if half his mind were somewhere else. "But if you drag someone out of a fire, before they can burn... Fires can make their own winds, did you know that? If a place has missed burning for too long - in the Fire Nation, things *have* to burn - the fire can be so hot it makes flame whirls. That's... it's scary, and it's incredible. I've never seen a bender make one. Jeong Jeong could, that's why the Earth Army's still hunting him..." Zuko dipped back into the brazier for more flames. "If you get caught in a fire, *don't breathe*. If the smoke doesn't kill you... the air's so hot, it cooks your lungs from the inside. You strangle to death." A soft *ha*. "Kind of funny. Fire and water. Doesn't matter which. You still drown."

Pale, Teo wriggled his toes. *Ow*.

"Quit that." Gold-and-green went back to work. Swept up and down, to the old ruin of his knees and hips. "Huh. Your nerves all look fine... oh. Damn." Zuko's hands seeped warmth into his hip. "You're lucky to be alive, you know that?"

"That's what Auntie says the healers said." Teo bit his lip, before any more of the old bitterness could slosh out. He had the wind. But sometimes... well. Done was done.

"They weren't kidding. You know how many blood vessels go through here?" Fire-wrapped fingers hovered over where Teo knew there was a scar. "Bone came right out here when you were little... just a little *that* way, and you wouldn't be here."

"You're serious." Teo had heard it for as long as he could remember. But - the Temple was family. Of course they wanted him to feel better about not walking. "I would have died?"

"Fast," Zuko nodded, grim. "You cut someone deep there, Teo, they're out in seconds. Dead in *minutes*. You got lucky." Fingers worked their way back to the break. "Now you need to work with that luck. You didn't hit your leg that hard; not hard enough to break bones like this. Your leg bones aren't thick enough."

"What?" Teo had never heard that one before. "Why? I hit things with my arms that hard, they don't..." He groped for words. Why hadn't he paid more attention the last time a healer poked him?

Fire fading, Zuko tapped the thicker muscles from pulling his wheels around. "Your arms get plenty of work. Amaya says bones need that just as much as muscles do. You don't put weight on your legs; you haven't walked in years. The bones got thinner. How much can you move?"

"I can wiggle my toes," Teo admitted. His leg still hurt. But it was just a nagging ache, and not a deep throb. "Shift my feet a little. Any time I move my knees, or hips - it hurts."

"I bet. All the tendons in there..." Zuko grimaced. Breathed out slow and easy, charcoal flickering down to warm coals. "I need to talk to Master Amaya. Research it. Until then - wiggle your toes more. And come back tomorrow."

It was like being drenched with cold water. "My dad could die because *you* didn't warn him. And you want me to come back tomorrow?" Teo demanded. "What is *wrong* with you? Don't you feel *anything*?"

The *look* he got back...

"Teo." Zuko's voice was very, very quiet. "Who is your father helping Aang kill?"

Something inside Teo seemed to cringe and get blistering mad, all at once. "That's not fair!"

"You don't want to talk to me about fair, Teo." Zuko didn't look away. "I grew up in the Caldera."

Those are my people. I know the way the waves sound against the docks. The patrols the Home Guard runs every night; when no one wants to be up, but someone's got to be. The shops and the silk-weavers and-

Coals flared.

Zuko glanced aside; slowing his breathing, slowing the flames. " *Fair*. Aang can bend air and water and earth. And he'll be attacking my father during the eight minutes we can't bend *anything*. If he even gets to my father. I *know* my father. He'll throw everything he can between him and the Avatar. Which means Aang's not going after my father. He's going after *my little sister*."

Teo swallowed, desperately grasping at something in this conversation that made sense. "Your sister. Who tried to kill you."

"My sister," Zuko agreed, grim. "Who loves our father. Who'd do anything for him. Including face off with the *Avatar* when all she has is a knife."

The flames went out.

"I'm going to do what I can," the prince said levelly. "If everything goes wrong, your father's going to need another way out. And I'll try to open one. Because I'm your neighbor. And good neighbors help each other." He didn't move, but the air was suddenly shimmering, choking hot. "But don't you *ever* ask me to care more about your father than I care about *mine*."

"Why not?" Teo snapped back. *He's going to kill me. Hot air - I'm going to die!* "My father isn't *evil!*"

Zuko didn't blink. Didn't breathe.

Then moved, swift as a downdraft, turning on his heel to stalk toward steaming water. "Want to know something *interesting?*"

The air around Teo was cool again. He gulped it, gripping his wheels and pushing to get *out* of here.

"If it's hot enough, a wave-style firebender can move *anything*."

A firebender can-

Steaming water erupted, surged around his wheels. Plucked his chair up like a dandelion, roaring; lifting him up and over stone and away-

Let me go!

Flailing hands caught something in the wind, like the click inside when he had just the right gust under his wings. Teo reached for it, turned like turning a wheel...

Wind whipped through water, sluicing cold as ice. Wood and bamboo crashed.

Ow.

"You okay?"

Teo blinked away water, focused on a white-painted face. Her red lips scrunched in a wince. "Ouch. That's going to sting."

Dazed, Teo let Saoluan dab a cloth at his bitten lip. "He tried to kill me."

The Kyoshi Warrior looked at him. Looked at the garden wall. Looked back at him. Arched a painted brow.

"Are you serious?" Teo pulled his wheels to back away from her, looking past her to her little brother and one very annoyed looking woman in firebender's armor. "He healed me, and then he tried to - to-"

The firebender heaved a sigh, and stalked toward the wall. "Can't leave the prince alone for *one minute*, I swear..."

Teo watched her swarm up and over shaped stone, gaping. "But- she-"

"Lieutenant Teruko? She'll be fine. Zuko's got a temper, but he'd never hurt one of his marines." Langxue looked Teo up and down, gaze lingering on the water dripping off his wheels. "I guess that's one way to find out you can bend."

"What?" Teo gulped. "I'm not- I can't-!"

Wind, catching on his fingers like silk. He'd *felt* it.

"Try," Saoluan urged, eyes shining. "We saw you. Just try."

Heart in his throat, Teo reached out to the wind. *Aang made the airball - like this...*

A shred of a breeze wrapped around his fingers like a spider-web ribbon, tickling all the hairs on the backs of his hands. It blew around, and around, and-

Slipped loose as he gasped, tugging on Saoluan's hair-tie before whispering away. Teo closed his mouth. Swallowed. "I'm..."

"Yeah." Langxue smirked. "Worth getting tossed around a little, huh?"

He wasn't going to gape. He *wasn't*. But - he was sitting in his chair. *Sitting*. Damp, a little frazzled, but definitely not splattered. And flying over the drowned swarm, he'd *seen* what water could do. "You mean - Zuko-?"

"Benders bend when they're upset." Langxue crossed his arms; eyed the damp wall again. "I was expecting something a little less messy."

"Zuko," Saoluan shrugged.

"Heh. Point." Langxue shrugged. "So what happened?"

Teo felt his ears burn. "The Fire Lord *is* evil!"

Saoluan winced. "Oh boy."

Teo hunched his shoulders, guilty and a little mad and so thrilled he almost didn't want to be mad. *The wind's mine. Wow. "He is."*

"Hey, I agree with you," the warrior said practically. "But come on. That's *his* dad you're yelling about. How would you like it if somebody called your dad the Fire Lord's lackey?"

"My dad's not-!" Teo cut himself off. Stared at the ground, flushed and guilty.

"No. He's not. Anymore," Langxue said firmly. "But there was a while when he was. And you still loved him. Because no matter what he did wrong, at the end of the day, he's still your dad."

"...I guess." Teo glanced at the wall, where not a shade of Teruko could be seen. "But how can anybody love the *Fire Lord*?"

"People are complicated." Langxue nodded down the street. "Come on. I want to tell you about some scrolls we've got." He grinned. "Though we should probably dry you off, first."

Quiet footsteps, and a sense of fire. "Sir?"

Teruko. Arms wrapped around his knees, Zuko huddled on the stone by the hot spring, trying desperately not to lash fire over Amaya's fragile new garden. "Are they gone?"

"They're going." The lieutenant crouched beside him. "Should I get someone, sir?"

"No." Breathe in. Hold. Out. "Just - don't go." *Don't leave me alone...*

"Right here, sir."

Right here. Maybe not the strongest firebender in the valley, but she was damn good. If his temper flared, Teruko could put the flames out.

But he wasn't really angry anymore. It just... hurt.

They want my family to die. People want my family to die.

Because the Fire Lord *was* evil, and cruel, and leading a war that had killed more people than he could probably imagine. They had every right to want Fire Lord Ozai dead. And Azula - Agni, he could only imagine what Azula had done these past years.

But I don't want to. It's not fair. She's my sister!

Breathe. Keep the rhythm slow. The world wasn't fair. It never had been.

"Is there anything I can do, sir?"

"Help me find a polite way to tell Teo I'm going to try and save his father even after he tries to kill mine?" Zuko said sourly.

"...Not sure there's a polite way to say that, sir."

Breathe. "Probably not."

"Might help if you could tell them why, sir?"

Why. Spirits. "Because I have to," Zuko said simply. "I made a mistake. I thought - frost it, Lieutenant. I thought *anybody* who'd ever dealt with Azula would know when they're heading right into one of her traps!"

Armor creaked a little; someone getting comfortable for the long haul. "I hear the princess is pretty good at what she does, sir."

"Yes. She is." Zuko closed his eyes. Tried to push the hurt away...

Azula.

His eyes snapped open. His breath quickened, picturing Azula's smirk, even if all she had to throw at her enemy was a knife and a bluff. Because *no one* knew when Azula was bluffing. "Yes," Zuko breathed, scrambling to his feet. "Yes, she is!"

"Sir?" Teruko sat up, alarmed.

"Need to think," Zuko tossed over his shoulder, grabbing for the sand tray. What he was about to write, he did *not* want lying around where anyone could read it. Even as ashes.

"Sir?"

"I've got an idea!"

Chapter End Notes

In WWII, people building the parts for armored cavalry didn't know what they were making, for security reasons. So they did a lot of guessing about what all these metal sheets would be used for... and this is how we got the name "tanks".

As for predicting eclipses... check out the orrery. And use a search to check this out: Antikythera mechanism

Best scientific evidence - they could, possibly, predict eclipses, even in 100 BC. Historically, Columbus wowed natives by predicting a lunar eclipse based on his ephemeris.

Chapter 62

"What do you mean, you're not going to help us?"

Grass and shrubs for Appa, fresh water, koala-sheep herds up here mean we should only have to watch out for shepherds, and they really don't like to see people anyway... Dragged away from tallying up the valley's defensive assets, Sokka sighed. Yeah. He'd been expecting this. Pretty much ever since Shidan had sent Hitomi to go send a message to his ship.

Doesn't need a ship if he's coming with us and Appa, Sokka thought. *But he's not.*

"Precisely what I said." Shidan stood unperturbed in the face of an exasperated airbender. "I have escorted lost children to a place they choose to part ways from me. It is enough."

"But you *know* the Fire Lord set up a trap!"

"And it is your choice to walk into it," Shidan said dryly, claws tapping near his hilts. "I will not drag Byakko into the pit of spirit-vengeance *your predecessors* have dug for us. Aid your invasion? *Rebel* against the Fire Lord? Piandao may choose to aid you, for Temul stands as sword and flame against the spirits who would destroy all Shu Jing's heirs. If she did not, that domain would be ravaged to the ground."

And Shidan had *definitely* looked at him, Sokka realized. Swallowed hard. *He knows.*

He was Piandao's heir. Which made him a great name rebelling against the Fire Lord. Oh, joy.

Hope Temul's good. We don't need any more spirits at our throats.

"If Shu Jing falls, many will be hurt, and many will die," Shidan went on. "If Byakko falls, Mount Shirotona will rage. The Fire Nation would be destroyed. And - oh yes - my wife and children would *die*. I will *not*." He eyed Katara, who looked like she was determined not to say anything, even if it killed her.

Can't figure out which way she wants to jump, Sokka thought ruefully. *On the one hand, Shidan's telling Aang no, and she hates that. On the other-*

"And as your waterbending teacher would be right to remind you, your invasion will be facing *my granddaughter*."

Yeah. That, Sokka thought. Sure, Azula was crazy. Even downright evil. But... gah. Even with those you never named, no one asked *family* to push them off the ice. How could Aang even ask?

"Do you truly expect me to strike at my own blood?" White whiskers bristled. "Your allies are Earth and Water; they would never trust me to do such a thing. And if I did, they would never trust Byakko afterward."

Aaand he hadn't even thought it through that far, Sokka realized, feeling a little sick to his stomach. Take out the Fire Lord, sure; capture or kill, they'd have to do one of those. But if the Earth Kingdoms and Water Tribes couldn't trust the great names to behave afterward...

"-Until all you bend are crimson and copper nightmares."

Zuko had seen it coming. *Months* ago.

Back then, he'd thought the firebender was paranoid. Now-

If somebody like Iroh was trying to pull this off, somebody everybody would listen to, it might work out okay. It's what the great names used to do, before the Fire Lord. You have a neighbor who won't keep his word? Who's cracking the ice everyone has to walk on? Kill him. And keep killing, until somebody in the other clan wises up enough to be honorable.

Or until the other clan was wiped out. That happened sometimes.

But we're not Fire Nation. Assassinate the clan head, then wait to see if somebody will act like a sane person - we don't do that. Earth won't stop while it's winning, and Water doesn't stop if the tribe's enemies are right there...

And they were going to be leading a whole army into the Caldera. Which was a city. Where people lived.

Oh man. This could get ugly.

"I trust you," Aang started.

"And am I to trust lives to the strength of *your word*?" Shidan narrowed gold eyes at Aang. "You ask me to throw my people under your allies' feet, and *trust* them not to trample us. Gyatso did not raise a fool, boy! Do not pretend you are one!"

Oh boy. Dragon about to go critical-

"He's not that dumb. He just doesn't want to think good guys can be awful, too." Toph stepped into Aang's line of sight. "Aang, he can't help us if we don't trust him. *All* of us. Or it's gonna be Zuko on the beach all over again."

Katara wrung her hands, stricken. "I wouldn't!"

"I believe that you would not." Shidan inclined his head to her. "But to ask all of your allies to trust me? They would be fools. And Chief Hakoda, and those who follow him, are no fools."

Aang waved his hands, thoroughly frustrated. "But we're going to stop the Fire Lord!"

As if that somehow solved everything, Sokka thought wryly. And maybe, in Aang's head, it did. Because stopping the Fire Lord was a good thing, so anyone who wanted him stopped had to be a good person, and good people *always* got along.

Never mind Temul. Or the Painted Lady. Or *Zuko*, for goodness' sake.

Ack. Did I just think Zuko was an okay guy?

Then again, compared to some of the Earth Kingdom "allies" they'd had-

"And I am under *orders* from my wife *never* to approach the Fire Lord," Shidan snapped back. "Because I would try to *kill* him. And I would *fail*. Byakko will not lose me to my own hate!"

That shut Aang up. Sokka breathed a sigh of relief-

"...Isn't he your family too?" Aang tried.

Augh.

Augh, augh, and what the heck was Aang *thinking*?

You know better. He's not thinking, he's feeling, Sokka told himself. *Aang knows we think family's a good thing. And Shidan wants to stop Ozai, and that's a good thing. And good people want good things. Good people don't-*

"He was my daughter's husband," Shidan said darkly. "The price of Byakko's safety. The man who has maimed my grandchildren, exiled my grandson, and nearly drove my daughter to insanity. I want his *head*, Avatar Aang. I want his blood staining Haegiri's blade! *You do not want me there.*"

Right, Sokka thought, almost numb. *That.*

"But... you can't..."

"You do not understand." Shidan closed his eyes, sighing as if the weight of the world had settled on his shoulders. "You are of Air. You were raised in quiet. Peace. You do not hate."

Aang swallowed. Looked away. "...I hate your granddaughter."

"And you have known her such a short time," Shidan said dryly. "No. You do not."

Aang stiffened. "You can't tell me how I feel!"

"I would not presume to tell the *Avatar* how to feel." Shidan's voice bit, like acid. "But I have spent rather more decades in this life than you, young monk, and I know *what* you feel. And what you do not. You do not hate. You do not hate *anyone*." He blew out a steaming breath. "Hate *gnaws* at you, airbender. It coils about you with every breath, biting your heart with its fangs. It whispers in the dark; it clouds the brightest day. For every beat of your heart reminds you that another heart still beats, bringing life to one you *cannot forgive*."

Aang gulped, finally pale. Took a few steps back, before he braced himself. "But... you *have* to forgive. Or - it's just a poison inside."

"Yes; so it is." Shidan inclined his head. "And I have lived with that poison longer than you could ever imagine. It walks beside me in every battle; it sleeps in my every bed. It is cruel, and it cares for nothing but the one I hate. But it is *mine*, Avatar Aang." His voice dropped, low and oddly calm. "I hate, and I know I hate. I will live hating Fire Lord Ozai, and if the spirits are not kind, I may die hating him. But it is *my* hate. *I* feel it. None will take it from me. None will soften it. I will live and die *myself*." He shook himself, like a tiger-dillo shedding water. "So. I will *not* join you."

Which, honestly? Made Sokka breathe a lot easier. He'd never heard hate described like that, *ever*. And given that Shidan seemed like he'd not just come to terms with it, but invited it in for a nice bowl of sea prune stew...

No. He *had* heard something like that before.

Zuko. What he said, about Katara; how she hates everyone, but most of all she hates herself-

When this was all over, he was going to find a nice, deep hole to hide in. Maybe ask Toph to dig him one. 'Cause if it took *two firebenders* who weren't even *human* to explain what his sister was going through...

Something's wrong with our village. Or the world.

Not sure which is scarier.

"No. I will leave, and spare us both." Shidan took another slow breath, and shook his head. "But I have something that may aid you. If you wish it."

Okay, time to put his foot down. "If it's a present like Temul's?" Sokka stepped between them. "I think we'll pass."

"It is most certainly not a gift," Shidan said levelly, apparently choosing to let a youngster's possible threat slide. "It is an old burden, asked of me by... one long gone." A quiet breath. "It is not a pleasant thing to bear. But it may aid you."

"What is it?" Aang asked, cautious.

"A memory."

Damn it, I let him get too close-

A warm hand touched him, and they were *elsewhere*. A place of thin mountain air, the tug of a breeze on whiskers, the blazing contrast of orange robes against blue sky. The warmth of an old hand on...

Scales.

Oh boy.

"Aang. You were not wrong to run away. Knowing what you knew, and what the Elders might demand - it was an impulsive choice. But it was *not* unwise." A quiet, laughing voice; old, familiar wrinkles creased in a smile. "I only wish you had taken me with you!"

"I am leaving this message with one we both trust. You know him well, even if you did not know how many of your pranks he watched over. Oh, the tales I have seen..."

"Forgive me. There is so little time.

"I know you will be lost when Kuzon finds you. Confused, and angry, and hurt at what will - what *has* happened, for you. The world has gone horribly wrong. It has been wrong for centuries; I suspect even I do not know the worst of it. But I fear it will become worse, very much worse, before it can become better.

"But you must not give up hope.

"Believe me, Aang. And believe in yourself. You must not give up! There *is* hope. Even as some are pulled into the darkness, there are others who struggle toward what is right. They are few, and scattered, but you *must* find them.

"If you hear this, some of them have already found you.

"Aang. What is going to happen - what *will* have happened - it is *not your fault*. Sozin knows the Avatar was born somewhere among us. It is the only reason he needed to act. His evil is his. You are not to blame for it.

"And you are *not* to blame for not being here! The Elders might think so. The other monks might. But I am your teacher. If you were here, I would tie you up and tell Kuzon to flee with you! You cannot hope to face Sozin's warriors. Not yet! Not on the day of the Comet itself, when all you know is Air. The Fire Lord's power is beyond anything you have seen a firebender wield, and on

that day...

"Aang. I am so sorry. By the time you hear these words, you will already know the Temple has burned.

"We will lose much. You, most of all. But even from the ashes, new life will rise. If our destruction means Xiangchen's bending, the way of harmonious accord, dies with us... then even in the midst of evil, Sozin's acts will loose one small blessing on the world.

"Never believe all is lost. There are those you do not know of, whom I found only after long searching. They will fear you; they fear all the Temples, and with good cause. But if your acts show who you are, Aang... they will know you are not the Elders. And they will show you more of Air than I would have believed, when I was young.

"Shidan knows them. But ask him carefully, Aang. A dragon takes the safety of those under his wing very seriously. And if his answer seems a riddle to you - recall that it may not be *his* riddle, but theirs. They are afraid, and like us, they prefer their own customs. Hiding is as much their way as wandering is ours. I know you will respect that.

"Sages say the Avatar is born where he is, *who* he is, for a reason." The old master chuckled. "I am an old man, and I think it may be that they are making that up. But if they have not... then it is not only the Avatar the world needs, my student. It is *you*.

"I will always be your teacher, Aang. And I will *always* be proud of you."

Parting. Worn fingers lifting away from scales.

"May the spirits grant you find him quickly." Gyatso's voice carried only flickers of emotion now, not the engulfing torrent of before. The rustle of his robes echoed off a Temple balcony, cloth colorless as the stars, pale with near-dawn. "He should not grieve alone."

:Negation. Demand! Gyatso flying free, not trapped in falling-stone and fire-:

"No, friend dragon. I will not go."

:Frustration. Pain. Pleading.:

"I must stay." The old airbender straightened his robes, looking away. "I know something of how your kind hunt. If Sozin's forces meet no resistance, none at all - he will be convinced there is nothing here to defend. He will *know* Aang lives." Gyatso let out a long, slow breath, that skirled into a wing-tugging breeze. "And I find... I cannot refuse my student that last protection. I *will* not."

:Mane-bristled, startled! Winds rising, red armor falling-:

"Yes." A slight, determined nod. "Yes, young one. I will fight."

:Sorrow.:

"From you?" Gyatso glanced back, surprise in gray eyes. "It would never occur to you *not* to fight for your life. Far less, for that of your clan."

:Agreement. Sorrow. Vows carved in a glory of ice catching sunlight. Shattered by a careless push.:

"I have wronged you," Gyatso murmured. "All these years - I thought you never understood."

:Bittersweet amusement. Claw touching Kuzon's hand. Kuzon's hand, reached out to the wind.:

"Ah. So I am wrong *and* right, is that it?" Gyatso smiled a little. "You do not understand peace. But you *know* you do not understand it... and that even so, it is precious to us."

:Agreement. Shared grief. Wishing-the-world-otherwise.:

"We cannot linger with what was. We must deal with what *is*." Gray eyes were intent. "Save them, young one. Save all you can."

:Temul on the ship's deck; ancient dragon-child whose nod was still sharp. Kuzon in the nursery, gathering the youngest. Maps, supplies; winds judged and hoped-for. Promised.:

"Good luck to you both." Gyatso took two long steps back. "*Fly*."

Bundles lashed. Sleepy complaints of children. Kuzon on his neck, trying not to weep, half-asleep despite every effort to fight night's pull-

He leaped, and caught the wind.

A reel of endless hours; dawn rising into day. A glimpse of black smoke far below. Fire Navy ships.

"Fly." Kuzon's voice was ragged; his grief burned like molten lead. "All we can do is fly."

(Hidden in a report to Mai on domain conditions, in fire-writing and in cipher.)

Sister,

Yes, of course it's your cipher. Mom taught both of us, remember? And I found a couple samples after each birthday present. "Learn by being cut." I did.

Grandfather says you're healing. That maybe I still can't trust you, but I can at least rely on you to be who you are. To act on the Fire Nation's best interests - even if they're not Father's.

I'm going to trust you.

Consider this, Sister. Who else is as skilled as you are? Who else would have the presence of mind - the power - to strike Aang down in the Avatar State?

Exactly.

If he dies at any other time - any other time, and you know what happens on battlefields - a dozen or so years from now, we're going to be up against a Water Tribe Avatar.

There are a conglomeration of reasons why that would be an extremely bad idea. I dealt with one of them in Ba Sing Se; ask your Dai Li about the haima-jiao. We're dealing with another reason here in the North - the drowned are at Koh's command, and the Face-Stealer knows how to whisper in an Avatar's ear.

But there's another reason. One that scares me.

I've found... some information, about when the Avatar cycle seems to have gone wrong. When the Avatar started commanding us to stay separate peoples, instead of advising us on how to overcome our differences.

It went wrong with Kesuk, Sister. The Avatar is a human as well as a spirit - and the human went

mad. And when those trusted with the Avatar did what they must, to save humanity...

The Face-Stealer saw humans inflict the ultimate indignity on his parent. Humans, killing the World Spirit's bearer.

(Yes, the Face-Stealer thinks the Avatar Spirit is his... whatever. No, I don't want to think about how that works, either. How something with that many legs comes from something that keeps cycling through human lives... Eww. Just trust me on this one, okay?)

He's been plotting ever since. I don't know what he's been plotting, but I've got enough of the pieces that I want to hide everyone I've ever cared about in the most desolate places in the world. Even you.

He's been plotting, and he's had almost a full double-cycle of the elements to do it. The next Avatar will be Water Tribe, again. A woman, again. From the North Pole, again.

Only this time, instead of just being raised a spoiled noble brat, she'll be raised to believe women aren't supposed to fight. Aren't supposed to go to war. Aren't supposed to choose their own lovers. With the Face-Stealer right there - right in the heart of the city! - whispering about how the Avatar is powerful, the Avatar is noble, the Avatar should have everything she wants...

Uncle doesn't get this. Amaya doesn't. But you, Sister-

I think you understand more than anyone.

This is the last chance we're going to get to throw off the Face-Stealer's plan. The last chance.

(...Give me a minute to go find rocks to break. Aang is our last chance. Agni, the universe hates me.)

You know what's going to happen when the sky goes dark. You know what you're going to do. And if I know you, you know all Father's plans, too.

Which means you're going to have to be clever. The most clever you've ever been. This is a spirit-tangle like you wouldn't believe... or maybe you would, now. If you know Father's intent, you can't tell the spirits you didn't.

I tend to believe the Avatar's companions can and will get him out of anything. (I feel very, very sorry for anyone who ends up on the wrong end of Sokka improvising. That smarts.) The people he's going to drag with him... I doubt they're going to be that lucky.

I have other options. I have other resources. But you, Sister - you are the best at what you do. So I'm going to do something terrifying.

I'm asking you to use your best judgment.

You know how to break people. How to hurt them. How to destroy them, without ever touching them.

Is it in the Fire Nation's best interest to destroy Aang?

...Tell Circus Girl I got better, she's not going to get another free shot like that, and I hope she stays clear of Aang. The Temple had something called harmonious accord, and I don't know if he could affect another airbender that way.

Stay lucky,

Your brother.

(Who is really pretty glad there's a whole ocean between us for my birthday. Again. So what are you going to throw at me this time? And is it flammable? I've got a volcano this time, I bet it is...)

Chapter 63

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Watching Azula giggle, Mai reflected as the three of them perched in the shadows of a roof ridge, was not for the faint of heart.

Flutterby or not, Ty Lee was as tough as they came. The acrobat flipped up out of a handstand, not a tile stirring out of place. "Ooo, that sounds like a good one! Your aura's all bright! Still blue," she added, thoughtful, "but your flames are blue, so - maybe that's all right for you? Is it good?"

"It's *interesting*," Azula rolled up the gauze-fine paper, gold eyes dancing. "Tell me, Mai. What would you say if I told you my brother decided to trust me?"

Mai almost blinked, automatically feeling for the weight of her knives. "I'd say he'd lost his mind."

"Uncle would certainly think so." A long nail tapped paper; the slightest scratch over the breeze. "Which makes this even more interesting. I don't think General Iroh *saw* this."

Sing-song and gleeful, the way Azula always was before her most vicious plans. The day was warm, but Mai felt a chill down her spine.

"He asked you to help?" Ty Lee frowned, collapsing into a contortionist's ball. "But he's an exile. And he knows you'd never let Aang hurt the Fire Lord."

"He certainly does." Azula was looking out over the Caldera, oddly pensive. The city was quiet now, Mai knew. But soon, all too soon...

"I think," the princess said abruptly, "there may be a slight miscalculation in Father's plan."

Stunned, Mai raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, yes; letting them land, letting them waste their efforts and get hopelessly entangled with the Home Guard just before the eclipse should work. And it would be very dramatic," Azula admitted. "But who do we mean to impress? The barbarians? Please; we want to *kill* them, not leave them alive long enough to be envious of our power. Our own people? The point of our military and our blockade is to keep the war *out*. Particularly, to keep the *Avatar* out. If a sky bison flies here, on the Day of Black Sun, just as Kyoshi did..."

"People would be terrified." Ty Lee's voice was very small. "It'd be awful."

"Awful," Azula agreed. "And deadly. Our people are disciplined but that..." She shook her head. "The panic alone would cost lives. I've taken measures to move a significant fraction of the civilians out of the Caldara before that day, but even so... no. No, it is not an acceptable risk." Gold eyes stared at Mai, cold and fierce. "Fear is a useful tool, but only in moderation. We want our people to *fear* our enemies. But our advantage on the battlefield isn't technology. It isn't even fire. It's our ability to plan, to *strategize*, when all our enemies are charging at us screaming. Terror is wrong. Terror makes you *stop thinking*."

You should know, Mai reflected. *You've used it often enough*. "So what do we do?"

"First, we need to determine our resources." Azula cast a flickering glance at Ty Lee. "We found

some interesting information in our... palace explorations. I never knew how hard a duty your family trusted you with. Protecting the great-granddaughter of the Great Betrayer."

"But that wasn't your fault!" Ty Lee's hands gripped each other, but her face was open as ever. "It'd be like... like saying you burned the Air Temples. You *didn't*."

Azula nodded, just once. "Kuzon didn't betray you, either."

Ty Lee went a little pale. "W-what do you mean?"

"Fire Lord Azulon took years to put the pieces together," Azula mused. "It wasn't as easy as it should have been. Fire Lord Sozin kept files on every lord, and their heirs, and *their* heirs. But Kuzon was so very far down the line of succession, there wasn't much information on him at all. Not until after he and Temul of Shu Jing conspired to spirit away Temple children."

Ty Lee shivered a little. "You know about that?"

"It was quick, clever, and daring." Azula's lips curved in a smirk. "One stroke, and he would have held resources no other lord could match. *If* the Fire Lord didn't already have onmitsu." She sighed. "But apparently, that wasn't his goal. He actually meant to save those children. No strings attached. Air is freedom, and he wanted them to *be* Air. Free." Gold sought gray. "Even of the Fire Lord."

Ty Lee dropped her gaze. "But... it's *right* for us to serve the lord of the Caldera. It's what we *do*. We feed the fires, so you can burn strong enough to protect all of us. If we didn't - we'd just blow, without an anchor. We might hurt people!"

It took every ounce of court-trained self-control for Mai to keep a straight face. "You're onmitsu." Hurting people was what they *did*. Admittedly, sometimes they did it in ways that meant their target never realized whose hand had ultimately killed them, but... even Ty Lee couldn't be that oblivious.

"Well... sometimes people have to get hurt," Ty Lee admitted, shoulders scrunched with misery. "But we don't... we're really bad at knowing who, by ourselves. If you just blow on the wind, you could hurt *anyone*. Just because that's where the wind went. I joined the circus to be different. But - not just that. I thought it would be better for everyone. So I wouldn't hurt any more boys when I smiled at them. That's what the circus *is*. It's just fun. Everybody knows the girls are just smiling at you because that's what they do. They don't really mean it." Ty Lee made herself even smaller. "I do really mean it, sometimes. But we can't just have fun and walk away. The Temples would do that, sometimes, when it wasn't a festival... and that was *wrong*. Not because of us. Because it hurts *you*."

Mai refused to blink. "Because it hurts *us*?"

"Well, yes. It's *fun*. But, it's not just fun for you. It means something for you. Something it doesn't mean to us." A sad shrug. "You *know* who you are. You always have to know."

Mai found her mouth hanging open. Closed it. "Are you saying-" She couldn't say it. She *couldn't*. It was too cruel. "Ty Lee. Your people marry. Your *parents* are married. I've met them."

"You met my mother." The acrobat smiled. "Everybody has a mother. Even if - well, even if she doesn't raise you, you still know who she *is*. Look at the compass to read the storm, right?" A tiny shrug. "But Kazenobu isn't my father. Or - well - not like you have a father. He might be my father. But that's not important. What's important is that he's my mother's partner." She swallowed, a little

pale. "Is that okay?"

No, was Mai's first, instinctive reaction. Marriage was about clans. About lineage. About knowing, when everything else fell apart, who would watch your back.

But this is Ty Lee. When it comes to what matters, when you know her limits... when hasn't she been someone we could count on?

Mai swallowed her words, and focused on what mattered. "If you needed help, would he be there?"

Gray widened, utterly surprised. "Of course he would! When I needed to get away, he helped me get into the circus. He's Mom's *partner*."

"Then that's enough for me," Mai said firmly. Quashing all the little voices yelping otherwise. If Ty Lee was happy, if she got what other people would get from their clan - it was enough.

But oh, what a *mess*.

"When you call Lord Kuzon a betrayer," Mai said carefully, "you aren't talking about betraying the Fire Lord."

"No!" Ty Lee uncurled a little, startled. "He took children from the Air Temple, Mai! And that was okay, he really really should have - but then he kept them away from us! Children! *Our* children! We had to protect them. We had to, and he kept them from us!"

"You had to protect them from themselves," Azula said, almost gently. "And Kuzon wouldn't let you."

"Yes! Exactly!"

Mai almost objected. Azula wasn't sympathizing with Ty Lee over an old wrong; Azula didn't sympathize, ever. She was after something.

But what?

"So if you had to protect them," Azula went on, "why did it take your people over eighty years to do it?"

"...Huh?" Ty Lee blinked at her, hands limp as if she'd lost her grip on the world.

"Eighteen years," Azula reminded her. "That's how long Kuzon has been dead." At the acrobat's continued silence, Azula stifled a sigh. "*Dates*, Ty Lee. I know you were never good at them in the Academy. But they matter."

"I don't know why," Ty Lee said in a small voice. "The past is over. You can't change it. The future hasn't gotten here yet. *Now* is what matters."

"Except that what happens in *now* is often determined by *then*," Azula said dryly. "Eighty years, Ty Lee. That's a lot of *now* to not find those children. If that was ever what your Elders intended in the first place."

"Of course it was!" Ty Lee said defensively. "They told us all that."

Azula arched a dark brow. "Always check your sources. Even the best witness can be mistaken."

Ty Lee gulped. "But I would have known if they were lying! I would!"

"Are you certain you would know?" Azula's words were precise as flame-daggers. "*Could* you, if they didn't know they were lying?"

Mai started, fitting facts together and - yes. There. "You don't speak of sensitive missions. Ever. You make reports. *Written* reports, for the Fire Lord. And for the clan elders."

"Well, yes," Ty Lee admitted. "If you keep scrolls locked up, you know who's been in them. And no one can listen through paper walls if you're *reading* what your clan did..." She went pale as ice. "You think someone wrote a *false report*?"

Expressionless, Azula handed over a scroll. "This was in the Dragonbone Catacombs."

Handling rolled paper like a sulky snake, Ty Lee started reading. Flinched. Unrolled more. Read farther.

Sat down, gingerly as if she thought she might fly apart. "This... this is an order for..."

"Assassination," Azula finished. "Apparently Fire Lord Azulon finally realized Kuzon would never lead him to the other airbenders."

"Other...?"

"He wanted those children to be free. To be Air." Azula's gaze was focused as a welding torch. "But no matter what he wanted - they were *children*, Ty Lee. How could they have hidden what they were, unless they were among people who knew how to hide airbending?"

Surreptitiously, Mai touched fingers to the inside of her own wrist. Still a pulse. No matter how frozen she felt.

"Other airbenders," Ty Lee whispered. "*Oh*."

"Not part of the Temples," Azula observed. "But not part of the onmitsu either. Which would make them different. Which would lead to *questions*." She smirked. "I've noticed your Elders don't *like* questions."

"No," Ty Lee admitted. "Others... but none of the trained onmitsu could go find them. Chi-blockers can't leave the islands..."

"Without very powerful permission," Mai concluded for her. Dropped into a crouch, to squeeze Ty Lee's shoulder gently. She wasn't into touchy-feely, but - this had to be bad. "I'm sorry."

"It's not *right*," Ty Lee said thickly. "It's just not."

"It's not," Azula agreed, eyes narrowed. "You're *our* people. You should have been safe in our lands, under our laws. Kuzon should never have had to hide any of you." Blue flame flickered on her fingertips. "We can't make that right. Not now. Not with the Avatar out there. We have to stop him. And if Avatar Aang does know the Temple techniques, and has any way to influence those whose blood was once bound to those Temples - we *have* to keep him out of the Caldera."

"How?" Mai asked practically. "The Fire Lord's plan has a major tactical advantage. We know they have to attack the Caldera. We know where they'll be. *When*." Within a few hours, at least; eclipse prediction probably wasn't as precise as whatever the spirits had handed Aang.

"All true," Azula agreed, not smiling at all. "This will be risky. We'll be stripping some of the Caldera's defenses at the worst possible time. *But*." Gold eyes gleamed, intent. "We have this

advantage. Chief Hakoda is not a fool. He can't simply drag whatever forces the Avatar's scraped together through our blockade and throw them at us. He'll want to rest them first. Organize them. Make sure everyone knows the plan. And he'll have to do that close to the Caldera."

Mai thought about that, drawing off what she'd learned when her family occupied Omashu. "Somewhere big enough for them to find, but hidden enough the Home Guard won't find them first."

Azula's smile could have cut glass. "I wonder how many places like that there are?"

Almost against her will, Mai smiled back. *Invade my city, will you?*

Min would probably say that wasn't fair. And he'd be right. *Home* wasn't fair. Home was where you *didn't* fight fair, because if an enemy had gotten that far, then if he got past *you*-

Not my city. Not my home!

"I can take command of a few Home Guard groups." Azula dropped down by Ty Lee, expression open as Mai had ever seen it. "But we'll have to be fast. And lucky. And we probably won't outnumber them. We'll need surprise." She reached out her hand. "Is there anyone - anyone you can think of - who could avoid answering to your Elders? Even for just a few days?"

Still staring at the scroll as if a thousand lost futures lay written in its characters, Ty Lee let out a shuddering sigh. Looked up. Silently, offered the scroll back.

Frowning, Azula took it.

A chill prickled Mai's shoulders. She'd never seen that expression on Ty Lee's face. Not worry. Not fear. Not even the concentration Ty Lee put into a tricky performance. It was...

Resolve.

"The Way of the Onmitsu," Ty Lee said, voice achingly clear, "is based on a *lie*."

She crumpled to the tiles, still.

She's not breathing!

Stronger than Temul, Sokka thought, fighting his way back to regular, human thoughts after that flood of other. *Or... maybe just different.*

It wasn't like Temul's memories. She used words, *thought* in words, even if the straight lines of language were slashed and scattered with the motion-shapes of steel and fire. Shidan - Shidan was *all* images. Shapes and motions and remembered-sounds-that-have-meaning. He didn't listen. He *saw*.

Man. If the inside of dragon-children's heads is like this...

Air was motion, and motion meant target, and target meant *food*. Or *threat*. Instinct, gut reaction; he could call it whatever he wanted, but Shidan was *born* to hunt and kill. Even if his mind said humans were off limits...

"You're really cute, but you're made out of meat," Sokka muttered to himself. "I'm going to be paying for that for the rest of my life. I just know it."

"I didn't want him to do that!"

Ow. Aang, could you keep it down a little?

But he didn't say it. Because Aang was shaking in Katara's arms, just like...

Like I would be, Sokka thought, a little guilty. *If I saw Mom again, and then she was gone.*

"I didn't," Aang hiccupped, "he shouldn't have..."

"It is not for the student, to decide what the master is willing to give," Shidan said gravely.

Katara bristled. Sokka felt like bristling himself, man that was *cold*-

Aang gulped, and scrubbed his eyes with his hand. "That's what - what Gyatso would say." He swallowed, a breath from breaking down all over again. "But he shouldn't have done it! Not for me!"

"If not for you, then for no one," Shidan stated. Still crouched, to meet gray eyes squarely. "You are his student. His hope for the world to heal, and the best of his teachings to be carried into the future. He loved you like a father; and like elder kin, he chose to die so you might live." Shidan's voice dropped, softer. "Gyatso told me once, Air is freedom. That you lived your lives so that every child would be wanted; so that every teacher could choose to have students, and teach them to wander as the wind. At their best, he said, the Temples were places of light and laughter, peaceful as the air at dawn." A quiet breath. "He chose to shatter his own peace, so that you might live. So that Kuzon might, and all those spirited from the Temples. He knew us, Aang. He *knew* what would draw Sozin's eye, long enough for Kuzon and Temul to cover their tracks. He knew us, and he *chose*." Softer yet. "Would you take that freedom from him?"

Aang looked away. Slowly, shook his head. "But it *hurts*."

"I know." Shidan looked away, pale gold squinted in pain. "I know."

Katara glanced at him, eyes dark. Hugged Aang a little tighter. "You lost Kuzon."

"To some of those he saved." Shidan drew in breath, a sharp *ha*. "Never rely on gratitude, young ones. It turns bitter too easily."

Katara shook her head, as if trying to shake the world back into place. "You're a *dragon*." She let out a long breath. "But... if Zuko's spirit-born... if *Azula* is... why are they Aang's enemies?"

White brows lifted, sardonic. "You have dealt with the Painted Lady," Shidan observed. "Why do you think?"

"What does she have to do with- *oh*." Blue eyes went painfully wide. "Oh. *Ow*."

"Um." Toph waved a hand Sokka's direction. "Clue, for anybody who didn't grow up on ice? What's spirit-born?"

"People you hear about in stories," Sokka filled her in, trying to figure out why Katara had brought that up. Dragons weren't spirits. Exactly. "Sometimes they end up with the girl, but they *always* end up in trouble. Usually because someone tricks them into saying they'll do something, and then they have to... keep their word..."

Promised.

Not just words. Not to Shidan. Elemental. Wind blew. Fire burned. *I promised.*

Hand, meet forehead. *Ow.*

"You know," Sokka said through his fingers. "I bet somebody thought that was a good idea."

"Oh, the spirits often think it an *excellent* idea," Shidan said dryly. "*They* don't have to live in this world. Or with humans, who may discover something new - who may uncover the fact that they were *wrong* - and then *change their minds.*"

Aang was looking between the two of them like they'd started juggling penguins. "I don't get it. You can change your mind and still keep a promise. You just have to be... well, *careful* about it."

Say what? Sokka tried to get out. Tried. His tongue seemed to tangle itself, because if there was one thing spirit-tales made clear...

"Enlighten me," Shidan said dryly. "Ozai's decree was clear, and absolute. *You are exiled, never to return to the Fire Nation unless you find and capture the Avatar.*" He stroked a long whisker, gaze steady. "Exactly how does one be *careful* with that?"

"Well, he did catch me!" Aang grinned. "Just, not for long."

One brow raised, Katara gave her brother a *look*.

Yeah, yeah; I'll be the bad guy. You owe me, Sis. "Wouldn't work," Sokka said, matter of fact. "Ozai's the guy who set the terms. He gets to say if it's done or not. Only way Zuko could get out of it is if a whole bunch of spirits - *stronger* than the Fire Lord - could say Zuko did it. And be telling the truth."

"Not even Agni could do that," Shidan agreed. "*Not for long*, is not captured at all. Azula has engaged you in combat longer than that."

"But there has to be a way. There's *always* a way." Aang's stance was set. "You just haven't looked hard enough."

A waft of steam rose from Shidan's breath.

Great. Tell him he didn't try hard enough to help his grandson. Sokka sighed. "Aang. Tao said spirits live by different rules, right? They're not like people. That's why we need the Avatar. Somebody who can be honest to both sides. And the spirits need that even more than people do. Gran-Gran said they're kind of..." He groped for the right words. "Well, kind of what's really true. About everything. Katara, what'd she always say?"

"Spirits are the heart of everything that exists," Katara said confidently. "Remember the Ocean spirit? He was terrifying. But that's what he's supposed to be. The sea's not friendly, and it's not safe. It *is*. If you honor him, you get good catches, and you always come home. If you don't, storms pull you under." She waved toward the east. "Or the Painted Lady. She wanted to be kind. To help her people. And I was trying to help, but - I didn't respect her. You can't use a real spirit's name for yourself, not like that! It hurts them. They have to be true to what they are. Or..." She swallowed. "Gran-Gran didn't like to talk about it. But the spirit-born stories - they make it pretty clear."

Toph's toes curled a little, away from whatever her feet were telling her. "Bad endings?"

Sokka grimaced. "Really bad. Turning into cursed monsters bad." He whistled. "When Hei Bai

showed up? I was sure that was what he was."

"Hei Bai wasn't a monster," Aang objected. "He was just upset. His statue was right in the middle of all those burned trees... Katara?"

"Oh. *That's* why." Katara hugged herself, as if she were cold despite the Fire Nation's incredible summer heat. "I asked the villagers why Hei Bai was taking people. They wouldn't talk about it. They had a *shrine* out there. No wonder!"

"Um..." Aang scratched his head. "I know Tao said you need to respect shrines, but - it was the *Fire Nation* that burned it down."

"It was humans," Shidan shrugged. "Humans promised to protect the shrine. Humans failed. Humans burned it down." He sighed. "Hei Bai may not have even known they were different humans, until you told him. Had a dragon been there, we likely would have been attacked as well."

"But you're not a dragon," Aang said confidently. "I mean, you've got the same name, and - I guess you saw what he saw, but - you're *not*."

"You never would see us for what we are." Pale gold was watchful. Waiting. "Airbender. We are large. We are dangerous. And we are *hunters*. Predators, who can easily kill a human, should we choose to do so. Who can and do decimate herds, unless our elders teach us otherwise. Why should men let us live, if we were not kin?"

Sokka tried not to giggle. Really. He'd never, *ever* seen Aang's jaw drop like that.

"You're serious." Katara let go of Aang. "I know spirits have a hard time telling us apart, but - dragons *have* to be different!"

"The spirits," Shidan slashed a clawed hand through hapless air, "think otherwise. The Face-Stealer wants *all* of us dead, Katara of the Southern Water Tribe. Human, dragon - that some of us bear swords, and others wings, does not matter. All the elements, all who live and breathe and think, are pinned in his trap." He *hmphed*. "My clan has worked for centuries to prize its jaws apart. Whether we will succeed, whether we will *survive* - that, I do not know. But we are Agni's children, and we will die before we surrender."

"Yeah. That's kind of the problem," Sokka pointed out. Because he knew you didn't - *they* didn't surrender. Not when the enemy was going to kill you anyway. And the Fire Nation didn't trust the Avatar. Couldn't. What a *mess*.

"True." The dragon's grin had the sharp, unnerving edge of the guy who *knew* he was going to be stuck cleaning the mess up. And that he was going to get even for that. Somehow. "Fire Navy marines have a saying. *The difficult we do immediately. The impossible takes a little longer.*" His grin deepened. "One might suggest... one thing at a time."

Man. If that wasn't Zuko in a nutshell...

And you know what? He's right.

Sokka pushed away the impulse to panic, and tried to think. *Difficult. What's difficult... getting to the Fire Lord.*

And we can do that.

We can do this. We've got a plan. Yeah, maybe they know we're coming - but that can't change

what's going to happen. There's going to be an eclipse. They won't be able to bend. We can do this.

Stop Ozai, maybe we don't stop the Fire Nation. But we do stop the guy who can make them fight.

Good place to start.

"And then Ozai won't be the Fire Lord anymore, and nobody will have to catch me to go home." Aang shot Sokka a triumphant grin. "See? I *told* you there was another way." Lacing his fingers behind his head, the airbender stretched with a sigh of relief. "Well, if you can't come, and I guess you really can't, why don't you tell Zuko the good news? No, no, wait! *We* should tell him. After it's over. All that time he spent trying to catch us - I can't *wait* to see his face!"

Shidan's face, Sokka decided, could best be described as *horrified*. "I would suggest you avoid my grandson," the dragon lord managed. "It would be kinder."

"Why?" Aang stopped bouncing. Frowned. "If the Fire Lord's gone - then there's no problem. We could even be friends."

For a moment, Shidan stared at him.

Quiet as snapped fingers, the dragon clapped a hand to his forehead.

"What? What'd I say?"

"I wish Gyatso were here," Shidan muttered. Shook his head, and lowered his hand. "I would roar at him. For a very long time. He was your teacher. The one supposed to encourage you to use reason, and logic. To follow a train of thought *without getting derailed by a butterfly*."

"What butterfly?" Aang glanced around the clearing. Fixed his frown back on Shidan. "What'd I *say*?"

"Zuko, son of Ursa and Fire Lord Ozai, grandson of Lady Kotone of Byakko and Shidan, will never be *your* friend." Shidan sighed. "Until you have found for yourself why - be kind. Leave my grandson in peace. He has quite enough to worry about already." He bowed, restrained and civil. "May fortune favor you. You will need it." A second, gentler bow. "Stay well, Toph. And if you cannot - kick them where it hurts."

"You too, Grandpa." Toph jabbed a finger his way. "Or I'm gonna come looking for you."

"I will count the days." With a faint smile, Shidan set off.

Aang bounced up onto his toes-

"Let him go. He needs to get clear of here, remember?" Sokka reminded him. "Even after we stop Ozai, we'll still have to get the word out through the whole Fire Nation. Shidan needs to keep his people safe until we can."

"Oh." Aang bit his lip. "Yeah. That could be bad." He frowned after the departing dragon. "But why does he think we can't be friends with Zuko, if he's not going to chase us anymore?"

"Aang..." *In through the nose. Out through the mouth. I know there's a working brain in there. I've seen Aang come up with ideas.*

...Usually after trying everything else, first.

Another breath. Like Master Piandao had taught him. Losing your temper was supposed to be the

last resort, not the first. "Aang. He told you. You just have to put it together. Dragons keep their promises. Anything else is lying."

"You mean back at your village? That was *months* ago. He can't still be mad about that."

"Oh, you have no idea, Twinkletoes," Toph muttered.

"Well... I guess maybe Zuko can." Aang grinned a little. "But that wasn't lying. That was just... being creative."

"You wouldn't be creative with Hei Bai," Katara said firmly.

"Okay. Okay!" Aang flung up his hands. "I broke my promise. I *said* I was sorry."

"But you're not." Katara nodded, understanding. "Not the way a spirit hears *sorry*. When you hurt a spirit, when you break a promise to them - if you want them to believe you're sorry, you have to promise you won't do it again. You have to mean it. And you can't do that, because you would do it again. Because it would be the right thing. You can't let the Fire Nation catch you. It would be the end for everybody."

"Thing is, that's probably what makes Shidan so cranky," Sokka put in. "It *was* the right thing to do. Just like taking on the Fire Lord's the right thing to do. And Shidan can't do it. He *promised*." He had to look away, remembering one too many shivery tales in the winter dark. "Nobody wants to be spirit-born. It's a *mess*."

"But I'm a spirit," Aang objected.

"Uh-uh." Sokka shook his head. "The Avatar Spirit's a spirit. You're Aang. You can break a promise. Just like any other regular guy." Only, Aang wasn't quite, was he? *Aang* could break a promise, and when the Avatar Spirit showed up it usually wasn't talking, so maybe it couldn't promise anything...

But what if it could?

Bad thought. *Bad* thought. Not going there.

"Zuko probably knows you did the right thing too," Sokka sighed. "He broke his promise back in Ba Sing Se. And that was the right thing to do, Azula's crazy - but it *didn't matter*." He pinned Aang with his gaze, just like Dad would when things got *serious*. "Aang. You broke your promise, and you got to fly away and laugh at him. He broke his... and it almost killed him."

"That's *not my fault*."

Stunned, Sokka scrambled to put his thoughts back together. Where had that come from?

"Nobody told me about spirits. Nobody told me about dragons. The *dragons* didn't tell me about dragons! Shidan could've talked to me any time, but *no*. He'd rather spy on everything me and Kuzon were doing, and tell Gyatso. Do you know how many times I got in trouble for that? And I thought it was Kuzon telling on us., and he never said he *wasn't* - how could he do that?" Pacing around the clearing, Aang jammed hands in his uniform pockets, adamant. "I'm a kid, Sokka. I don't know why you and Katara think you're not. You're not elders! So I don't know about spirits, and dragons, and - *weird* stuff, like dragons turning into people. *I'm not supposed to*. That's grownup stuff. Elder stuff, even! And if Zuko and Shidan and the whole Fire Nation is mad at me 'cause I'm not an elder - whose fault is that? They're the ones who burned the Temples! Who killed - who *killed*-" His face scrunched up, utterly miserable.

"Oh, Aang." Katara hugged him. "It's going to be alright. Somehow."

Sokka backed off from the motherliness, rubbing the start of a headache. *I am not a kid. I'm a warrior of the tribe. I've been ice-dodging - well, rock-dodging, but Bato said it was just as tricky. And he should know. He recognized us as adults. We're not kids anymore. We have to be responsible...*

But Aang had backed off. Denied the mark. Because he was supposed to be trustworthy, and he'd lied.

First time I ever really got mad at him. How could he do that?

And the first time Sokka had ever had the creepy thought that maybe Aang didn't *want* to be a grownup. Which was just crazy. Sure, it was okay being a kid, people looked after you. Really little kids *needed* looking after; they didn't know any better than to crawl onto thin ice. But you wanted to get past that. To learn everything, and take care of yourself, so your parents could spend less time on you and more taking care of the whole tribe.

And that sorted with what Temul had stuck in his head, too. The Fire Nation liked kids to be a little older before they made them lords, it was a lot of responsibility - but Kuzon *had* been lord of Byakko. At *fifteen*.

Sure, he'd had help. Including one really sneaky dragon. But that didn't count. Every great name was supposed to get help, if they ran into something they weren't sure about. That was part of what being a grownup was all about; knowing what you *didn't know*.

Aang didn't know what he didn't know. And he didn't want to.

"We're screwed."

Toph, almost under his elbow. Sokka tried not to trip over his own feet in a startled jump. "Don't *do* that!"

"Sorry. But we are, aren't we." Toph cocked an ear toward the mumbled litany of woe and soothing going on. "I kind of see where he's coming from. I'm a kid, too. And I didn't get told I had to save the world. I came with you guys because I wanted to. Big difference."

"I never said it was his fault," Sokka protested. "It just - well, it just *is*. The Fire Nation's got some of the same problems spirits do. We've got to deal with that. Heck, we're going to take *advantage* of it. Stop Ozai, and we should stop everybody who has to be loyal to him." Sokka grabbed his wolf-tail. "That's not anybody's *fault*. That's being responsible! That's-"

"Being a grownup?" Toph put in.

"Well, yeah," Sokka admitted. "What's wrong with that?"

"Sounds like everything."

Not going to smack my forehead. Enough bruises there already. Sokka sighed instead, letting go of abused hair. "Shidan said Zuko's got enough problems..."

"Yeah?" Toph tilted her head his way, suspicious.

"Whatever he's got? *I'd trade.*"

"Let me get this straight." Teo's voice was a little higher pitched than usual as he waited upslope from them, Changchang and Lieutenant Teruko each keeping a hand on his chair even though Teo had the brakes on. "You're going to be bringing up *white damp gas*? And you call this *safer*?"

Zuko crouched by a warm yellow flame of gas dancing over a rock crevice, hand on the rough crystals to feel for fire down below. Shirong's hand was bare inches away, the Dai Li's green eyes half-closed in concentration as he reached for stone and heat. Langxue was back a few feet with Saoluan, trying to feel any shift in the air that might warn of poisonous gases.

The glider's knuckles, Zuko noted, were white.

Can't blame him. I don't like this either. "Safer than letting it just build up pressure in the magma," Zuko stated. "And safer here than some other places. White damp kills people."

"*I know that!*" Teo swallowed. Shivered a little. "My village worked mines before the flood. I've heard the stories."

"But if you can burn it again, in open air," Zuko pressed on, "it's harmless. Not good to breathe; it's like blackdamp, you have to mix it with good air to be safe. But it won't kill you. Not like white damp does."

"...Okay," Teo said after a moment's blank silence. "Say that again?"

"I wouldn't mind a few more details myself," Shirong admitted. "You seal caverns to lock white damp *in*. You generally don't let it out. One spark from a pick..."

"It blows. I know," Zuko nodded. "That's why you want to burn it. *Above* ground, not in stone where things can blow to pieces."

"If you seal it, there's no *risk* of blowing to pieces," Shirong said dryly.

"The Fire Nation doesn't have earthbenders, remember?" Zuko eyed him, smile a little wry. "We can't seal the ground. So we have to get it out, instead. It's not just in mines. Volcanoes *make* white damp. And a whole lot of other things. If you don't get it out of the soil, you lose everything. Crops, animals, *trees* - spirits. Everything."

"White damp can kill trees?" Changchang looked skeptical, but waved a hand in a calm, *go on*.

"Yes, ma'am," Teruko nodded. "It's one of the things you keep an eye out for. Trees are dying, and there's no good reason for it? Especially if they're down in the hollows? You call for a Fire Sage, fast. It might be all the warning you get before a peak gets cranky enough to spew the *really* nasty stuff."

"In the hollows..." Teo sat up, intent. "And it goes *down* in the mines. In the low spots. It sinks?"

"The scrolls say it's actually lighter than most of air." Langxue spread fingers in the wind, frowning. "But - they also say it can be mixed with other stuff, and that sinks."

"I don't know how light it is," Zuko shrugged. "When it's from a volcano, it's coming up out of the ground. Trees die first because their roots are deeper."

"*Huh.*" Teo chewed his lip, thinking.

"If the scrolls are right, we can figure out how to feel it, even in the rest of the air," Langxue told him. "If we keep working at it."

"Feeling gas." Teo's knuckles gained a little color back. "If we could *bend* the natural gas, move it out of the tunnels Dad broke into, and then you could help us seal the leaks up... wow. That'd make the whole Temple safer."

A number of snarling replies to that leapt to mind. Zuko pushed them back. *Not the time*. "If we don't vent the pressure out of Asagitatsu, there won't be much of your Temple left." He peered upward. "Based on the size of the caldera already... coin toss, if the buildings up there would survive or not. *If* they did, *if* you made it through the poison gases and the clouds *hot enough to vaporize you* - the explosion would kill everything on the lowlands, and wipe out crops all the way south. Maybe even to Ba Sing Se. Even if you lived, you wouldn't be able to stay here." He eyed Changchang. "I wish there was another way. But we don't have enough trained, strong firebenders to cool the magma down."

"Your grandfather," Shirong started.

Zuko winced. "He won't be coming. Don't look at me like that," he muttered, cross, as everyone in earshot seemed to stare at him at once. "I know my luck. I know how spirits get ideas stuck in their heads. He wants to come. Byakko *wants* to help. But this is too perfect a setup. The Face-Stealer wants humans dead. The Fire Lord wants all rebellions crushed. And the World-Spirit thinks I *owe* it, just for being alive." *Don't mention what yāorén are supposed to be. Not to Teo. Not yet*. "We're not going to count on somebody rescuing us. We have to do it on our own." He looked at the dancing flame again, trying to think only of fire, and not the gnawing terror of *what if this goes wrong?* "Besides. They'd be doing the same thing. By moving heat around, not rocks, but... We can't *stop* the eruption. What we have to do is *slow it down*."

"By letting white damp-" Teo stopped, finger still lifted in midair. Lowered it, dark brows scrunched in calculation. "It's like having a pot on to boil, isn't it? Leave the lid on, the whole thing can blow off. But if you crack it a little..."

"Right," Zuko breathed, relieved. "Problem is, we're not just going to get steam. Volcanic gases are *nasty*." He shrugged. "But most of them, if you can burn them? They're a lot safer."

Teo frowned. Lifted his own fingers into the wind, and craned his head up at the wisps of fog streaming off the mountainside. "I've seen my dad try to work with natural gas before. Not all of it's going to burn where you want it. Some of this stuff is going to get into the air."

"I know," Zuko nodded.

"And if you're getting the volcano to push some of its steam out another way - the currents we use at the Temple could change," Teo added.

"I *know*," Zuko repeated. "This isn't going to be pretty. We can try to keep it to pinpricks, so there's never too much poison near where people are. But it's still poison. Accidents can happen." *Don't flinch. Don't*. "But if we don't do anything, people are going to die. My people. Your people. And a lot more." He made his fingers relax, before nails could bite too deeply into his palms. "I wish I had another idea. This... it's the best one we've got."

Teo scratched his head, thoughtful. Glanced at the lady still gripping his chair. "Auntie?"

"The Earth King gave Prince Zuko these lands by treaty," the elderly woman observed. "I may be just an old woman, but as I understand our laws... he doesn't need to ask us for anything."

Zuko tried not to smirk. The Earth Kingdom probably wouldn't think it was funny. "I'm not asking. We're neighbors. In the Fire Nation, if you're going to do something that changes the water

downstream, you talk to your neighbors, first." He waved up at the cone. "It's not water, but air flows, too. So we're talking. In case you have any better ideas."

"Any better ideas," Teruko muttered. "I wish we could wait for help, sir. Shirotona's used to being managed. Asagitsatsu?" She shook her head.

"She said we could try," Zuko reminded her. Eyed Teo again. "You're the wind expert here. If we open a vent, a small one - what do you think?"

Teo licked a finger. Stuck it back in the wind. Scanned the valley walls, the shape of the cone, the way waves lapped against the harbor shores. "I think it'd be okay," he said at last. "But if we really end up shifting the currents, that could change."

"One thing at a time." Zuko made his breath light and even, touching the faint sense of deep fire so far below. "Ready?"

"We want a channel to here, but we need to seal it from the natural gas until it's ready to burn," Shirong said, half to himself. "I think I have the right spot." He took a rooted stance; brought his hands slowly together, palm to flattened palm. Gingerly - carefully - pulled knuckles away from each other, fingertips and heels of his hands still touching. Again. And again.

Under his feet, Zuko felt a whisper of movement.

He stood back; eyes on the flame, not the rock. Watching an expert bend was always fascinating, but he'd have to skip it this time. You couldn't see white damp. You couldn't smell it. The only way you even knew it was there was-

In the heart of burning yellow, there was a sudden thin thread of blue.

"Stop!"

Shifting a foot back to break his stance, Shirong parted his hands. Only then did he glance at the gas flame, where bits of blue still danced. "I didn't realize it would be that close to the surface."

Teo gulped. "Neither did I."

"Teo?" Changchang gave him a worried look.

The glider looked pale. "Whatever's doing... that? With the fire? It's down there. Kind of... all down there." The wave of his hand encompassed the entire caldera. "It's... big. *Really* big. I remember what it felt like when Sokka and Dad blew up the gas with the balloon furnace. This..." He shuddered. "This is a *lot* bigger."

"Well, it looks like it's all burning. If it weren't, there'd be a lot more blue." Zuko breathed in, then out, testing the flame's response. "Doesn't feel like it's really changed. Is the rock holding?"

Shirong rested a hand on the nearest outcrop. "It's stable. For now."

"That could change," Teo muttered, still a little white. "Really quick." He reached toward the flame; apparently thought better of it. "If I just knew what I was doing... wait. Black damp is like candle smoke. Maybe if I practice with that... and no one's tossing me around in hot water at the same time..."

Zuko winced. "About that-"

"I'm sorry."

"I wish I'd been able to think of - what?" Zuko stopped, utterly bewildered.

"I said, I'm sorry." Teo gave him an odd look. "Langxue told us; we're trying to figure out airbending with scrolls and a lot of guessing. If that's what you thought it took to find an airbender... we'll just have to figure out a better way later."

"That would be good," Zuko stalled, trying to get his thoughts in order. *He said he's sorry?*

"You're old enough to handle a little scare. I'd hate to do that to a kid. Even some of your younger gliders."

Hand still out to feel the air, Teo glanced at him, eyes wide. "You think we might have more benders?"

"We haven't had an earthbender born at the Temple for nearly three years, now," Changchang observed. "Near, but not there. We don't have that many youngsters, true - but I'd have expected a few more." The elderly woman rubbed her chin, thoughtful. "Best to find a different way to test for it, yes. Don't your scrolls mention anything?"

Zuko winced.

"That looks like there is a way." Teo eyed him warily.

"There is?" Langxue frowned at both of them. "You didn't show me that scroll."

Zuko sighed. *Not getting out of this one.* "How does a cat-owl in a hurry move her litter?"

"Well, she..." Langxue ground to a halt. "Seriously?"

"Yes."

"You're kidding." Saoluan rubbed at the back of her neck. One hand mimed plucking up a kitten-owllet at the nape, and tossing.

"Yes," Zuko bit out.

"Then again, maybe your way's not that bad," Teo muttered. Shaking his head, he eyed the blue-streaked flame. "It feels like a lot. But do you have any idea how much we're dealing with?"

"I've got some rough calculations-"

A shadow sailed overhead.

"That's Sima." Teo sat up, evidently reading glider colors and shape the way Zuko read insignia. "She *hates* walking back uphill. This has to be important."

Another pass, and a child maybe a bit older than Toph, it was hard to tell through the bundled clothes, touched down running-

"Not that way!"

Zuko yanked the flames back before they could lick at vulnerable wings. Langxue and Saoluan both grabbed for her; one with hands, the other with a tangling rope of water. And Teo-

The whirling dust wasn't strong; the girl's goggles probably blocked most of it. But it caught glider

wings, lifting and shoving *back*.

Stumbling, Sima sat down hard. "Fire? Oh, fire - oh no - why's fire *here* when the army's up there, that doesn't make sense-"

"Army?" Zuko pounced.

"Eeep." Behind glass, hazel eyes were very wide.

"It's all right, Sima." Teo rolled toward her. Away from the gas jet. "What army? Where? The Fire Nation?"

Oh, hell, Zuko thought numbly. *If they came overland - but that doesn't make sense! We hold parts of the coast here, but the mountains? One earthbender in the right place, and they're a deathtrap. I was sure they'd come by sea-*

"No!" The girl gasped. "Green! They're Earth Kingdom!"

...And that's not much better. He traded a glance with Shirong, who had the intent look of someone rifling through a mental filing cabinet for just what units could be out this way. "Who?" Zuko demanded. "How many? What's their standard? Who's leading them?"

The goggles made her blink so much like a cat-owl's. "Um. Lots?"

Totally taken aback, Zuko shook his head. Lots? When he'd been twelve, he could estimate a unit's numbers with a quick glance, and their combat readiness with just a little longer to look through a spyglass at signs of polish and wear-

He held out a hand, palm up.

Teruko looked at him. Looked at the girl. Sighed, and put a spyglass in his hands. "Sir. You shouldn't."

"I'm lighter than you."

"Fighting dirty, sir."

"Uncle can't do it. Even if we pried him out of the vault, unless they've got another balloon here we don't know about..." Zuko fixed Teo with a look. "Do you?"

Startled, Teo looked back. Then at the spyglass, the mountains, Sima's glider... "You can't be serious."

"I don't care if it's a balloon, a glider, or a dozen phoenix-eagles," Zuko said grimly. "Get the settlement warned. Get anyone at the vault warned. And *get me up there*."

Well. It wasn't phoenix-eagles.

Sokka's design, Zuko thought, as Teo escorted their balloon up into thinner air. *Should have known it was him. Anything this crazy...*

But he hadn't known. Because the first he'd heard of war balloons was a report Uncle had snagged from War Minister Qin's dispatches, and if that didn't promise all kinds of mayhem in the future...

"Breathe, sir." Teruko had to be as nonplussed about being mountain-high as he was. But she hid it

better. "Air's thin up here... oh."

Oh. Yeah. Green and dun, snaking through one of the higher passes like a coiling cinni-vanilla vine. With *that* standard, carried proudly at the front...

General Fong.

Head in his hands, Zuko took a deep breath. Another.

"Sir?"

Determined, Zuko straightened. *She's counting on you. They all are.*

Spyglass in hand, he started tallying numbers and equipment. But he paused, just long enough to give his lieutenant a wry smirk. "Looks like my birthday present got here early."

Chapter End Notes

Firedamp is an old mining term for flammable gases including methane. Afterdamp is a mix of gases including carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide after an explosion.

White damp is carbon monoxide. Blackdamp, stythe, or chokedamp are carbon dioxide. Stink damp is hydrogen sulfide. These terms were in use by 1480 in real life; I think we can say the Avatar world has plenty of their own experience with mining to define these as well.

Chapter 64

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Boo!"

His most beloved student stared back at him, a bit glassy-eyed. "Appa's got Kyoshi Island swords. The Guru has six arms. And now you're here." Aang buried his face in his hands. "It's not *fair*."

He looks so different with hair. Gyatso sighed, settling down cross-legged on grass, never stirring a blade of it. The walls between the spirit world and the living world were always thin around the Avatar, but - well. He was no dragon-kin, to step between worlds as a ghost. Aang had to weaken his own hold on the living world for Gyatso to have even a hope of speaking to him. No matter how much he'd wanted to. "No. It most certainly is not fair. Fair would have been for the Elders to have kept silent until your sixteenth birthday. Every Avatar was meant to have that gift; to be raised without the world's weight upon them. At least for sixteen years."

"Yeah," came muffled through Aang's fingers. "Lucky me. *You're not real.*"

"Whether I am real or not, young airbender," Gyatso said gently, "would it do you any harm to tell me what has upset you so?" He laughed, just a little. "Though knowing what I have seen, it might be a shorter list to say, what has not?"

Slowly, fingers parted. Aang blinked through them. "You... really sound like Gyatso."

The old master smiled. Reached out to ruffle black hair, even if all Aang would feel was the tug of a breeze. "Shidan gave you my message at last. I hoped that he would have the chance. But I could not be certain of it. Even the canniest dragons often fell to Sozin and Azulon." He sighed. "And Makoto." Spirits, but he wished he knew where that treacherous she-beast was. She was a master of concealment, like the onmitsu; few spirits could sense her, much less track her movements.

"You never told me about dragons!" Aang flung up his hands. "All this time I thought Kuzon - and - Shidan *spied* on us!"

"Spied?" Gyatso chided his student. "Did you miss a red dragon breathing steam on your shoulder? He never tried to hide what he was."

"But-!" Aang gaped for a second. Swallowed, and forged on. "You never told me he was like a person!"

"And why should I have told you that?" Gyatso asked. "He is not *like* a person. He *is* a person. Only, one very different from you or I." He clucked his tongue. "Does the wind tell you where it is blowing? No. You must observe it. As you must observe any person. For they, too, may be driven by forces we do not see, toward goals we may never expect. Did I tell you what would happen if you sledded down Omashu's delivery chutes? Or rode wild hog-monkeys? Of course not! What would be the fun in that?"

"Shidan's not fun," Aang shot back. "And Zuko is - well, whatever the opposite of fun is? He's it!"

Gyatso sighed. "No one is fun when they are sad, Aang. Growing up can be very painful."

"No kidding," Aang grumbled. "So why does everyone keep acting like *I'm* supposed to be a

grownup? I'm not! I'm a kid!"

"We do not choose when to grow up, my student," Gyatso said plainly. "Just as we do not choose when the wind blows. All we can choose is to have the courage to trust the wind, and see where it will guide us."

"I can choose when the wind blows!"

Still so young. "Aang?" He waved a hand. "Do you see that tree?"

Aang eyed it almost as dubiously as he had Gyatso. "It's not trying to sing at me, so... yeah."

Heh. Aang never had had the chance for the week of meditation older masters tested themselves with. It had been far too onerous a task for a child... and yet, had he harmed Aang by avoiding it? An Elder would *know* when he was hallucinating. "Could you knock it down with airbending?"

"Sure!" Aang jumped up into a ready stance-

So young, and so slow to think. "Ah. But *should* you?"

Aang lowered his hands, confused. "What do you mean? You told me to!"

"No," Gyatso shook his head. "I asked if you *could*." He smiled. "Now, I am asking if you *should*. You would not want to disturb that nest, would you?"

Aang stood very still a moment. "A nest of what?"

Gyatso raised his brow. "Why don't you find out?"

Aang gave him a dubious look. Crouched, and leapt up into the branches.

Amused, Gyatso waited.

"Aackkk!"

Aang scampered back down, as a pair of blue-and-gray mocking-jays stooped and scolded at him. High above, Gyatso could hear hungry chicks peeping.

Ducking one last dive, Aang brushed bits of bark off his clothes. "Man! Sokka was right about enemy birds."

"And who poked his nose into their children's quarters, hmm?" Gyatso pressed his palms together, drawing on a moment of meditation for patience. "It is possible to observe from a distance, young airbender. Often, it is even wise."

"But if you don't get up close," Aang argued, "you might not see everything."

Ha. And well argued. "Very true," Gyatso agreed. "It is a delicate balance, knowing when to draw near, and when to pull away. But if those who live with peril tell you a wise man does not draw nearer, or," he held up a hand before Aang could interrupt, "that a wise man takes precautions before he nears a danger - it would be prudent to *listen*." Gyatso settled back with a sigh. "I nearly drowned by not listening, once."

"You did?" Aang said in disbelief. "But you listen to everybody!"

"Ah. As an Elder, yes. When I was younger? I was not so wise." He gestured toward the coast, not

too far from here. "As a young man, I went with my bison to what seemed a lovely black-sand shore, with the most enticing surf breaking over the rocks. I had left my robes above the tide and waded in to my knees before an old seaweed-gatherer saw me, and yelled at a damned young fool of an airbender to stop." He pierced Aang with a look. "The rocks there channeled a riptide when the currents were right. I could not see it. I could not feel it in the wind. But the villagers knew it was there... and even so? A week before, it had claimed two lives." He held thumb and forefinger an inch apart. "That close, I came to venturing deep enough for it to seize me. And I would have never known you, or you me."

"They warned you." Aang looked down, sad. "The Fire Nation was different then."

"Customs were different," Gyatso corrected him. "People remain much the same. They love, and hate. They try to do good, and fail, and yield to fear rather than do what is right."

"People used to be better than that!"

"Did they?" Gyatso asked. "Or did they only have easier choices? Aang. It is easy to say, *I will not eat meat*, when you and those you love are fed and well. But if you are running for your life, and the children with you are hungry, and there is nothing you recognize as safe to eat... what do you do then?"

"It's not the same." Aang stood his ground, determined. "The Fire Nation didn't have to start this war."

"No, they did not," Gyatso agreed. "But who starts a war is not nearly as important as who finishes it."

"Not important?" Aang stared at him like he'd stood on his head. "I'm the Avatar. I have to be fair!"

"That is not possible," Gyatso said regretfully. "Sozin is dead. As is Azulon. Of all those who saw this war begin, mere handfuls still walk the earth. Shidan among them," he allowed. "The dead are the concern of the spirit world. You are the Avatar, the bridge between the world of the living and the spirits who affect this world. You must care for the living." He sighed. "And no, it is not fair. It merely is."

"But..." Aang blinked, eyes wet. "If I can't care about people who are - gone..."

"Tch. Listen." Gyatso flicked the tip of Aang's nose. "You must care *for* the living, yes. That is the Avatar's duty. But you are also Aang, and human. No one can tell you that you cannot love those who move beyond the living world. We are all part of those we love, even if they seem so very far away." He smiled. "Think of it as training, young one. After all, if you can bring the Fire Nation to peace, surely you have the wit and courage to face the next task."

"The next one?" Aang pulled back, wide-eyed. "Beating the Fire Lord isn't enough?"

"Ah. But after he is beaten, you will need to heal damage that was done before Sozin's war." Gyatso beamed. "After all, you cannot rebuild airbending, or our nation, by yourself! You will need our long-lost cousins. Those Kuzon saved... and those whose sanctuaries Shidan protects, even now."

Aang blinked at him.

Oh dear. "Shidan did tell you of those Kuzon spirited away," Gyatso stated, trying to ferret out exactly what had disturbed his student. "And I know Temul left you clues of the girls she snatched from under Sozin's very nose. The Fire Nation treasures their clans. Force children to abandon their

kin and bending? They would never be so cruel."

"...You knew there were other airbenders."

"Yes," Gyatso acknowledged. "And no, I did not tell you."

"Why?"

Ah. This would be painful. But now, there was no way to avoid the truth. "Aang. When was the last time you kept a secret?"

"Well, I... um..."

Gyatso nodded. "Precisely."

"But that's not fair!" Aang protested. "You could have trusted me!"

"And burdened you with so many lives?" Gyatso said seriously. "That is a pain only grownups should have to bear."

Aang gulped. "Then why did you make Kuzon do it?"

"I did not make Kuzon do anything," Gyatso said firmly. "He saw that we needed help. He chose to act." The old master chuckled. "And perhaps he thought Ran would be impressed. Never underestimate that, young one! Girls may follow heroes with their eyes, and handsome young men with their sighs. But the way to win her heart is by faithfulness. Promise her the moon, and you may win her for the day. Promise her the humblest flower, and keep that promise - and she may be with you forever."

"Um." The tips of Aang's ears turned red. "We're not - I mean, Katara's not - I'm supposed to be a monk, and... I think Water Tribe guys are supposed to be around. All the time."

"Monks and nuns, yes. And so the Temples would not recognize an airbender marriage," Gyatso informed him. "But there were many of us who had... understandings. And if we only lived together a few days of the year, there are many sailors in the Earth Kingdom and the Fire Nation who do the same. And you should ask young Sokka about Water Tribe hunting trips." Gyatso elbowed his student, light as the brush of a flutter-hornet's wing. "Why, they may step out one autumn night, and not come back until spring the next morning!"

Ah, yes. Now he had his young student thoroughly flustered. Heh!

If only I'd been able to do this a hundred years ago.

Eventually Aang ran out of sputters, and just looked at him. And swallowed. "Were... understandings... secrets? Is that why I never heard about them?"

"Yes," Gyatso said plainly. "The Elders would not have approved. Attachment was forbidden; and perhaps for old graybeards who no longer wished to wander, that was well. But for children? For those who would raise those children? A child needs first warmth, and safety, and the certainty that no matter the terrors of the night, his teacher will be there in the morning. Think of your young friend, Toph. She is brave, and strong, and a master among earthbending masters. But when she was a tiny blind baby, who had no more knowledge of how to bend than how to speak? How would she have fared then, without her parents' love?"

"So... you're saying it's not that attachment is wrong," Aang said slowly, frowning as he worked his

way through it. "It's just... not right for elders." He thought that over a minute, then flung up his hands. "Then why didn't Guru Pathik tell me that? He kept saying, if I loved Katara, I had to let her go!"

Gyatso rolled his eyes toward the heavens. *Old friend, I respect that you meant to help. But I think, when you pass into my world, there will be a cake waiting for your face!* "Pathik is a hundred and fifty years old. He has outlived nieces, nephews, grand-nephews, great-grand-nephews, and too many great-great relations to count. He has no attachments to living humans. And he has never raised children." He *hmp*hed. "And it is likely he forgot, as so many do; the Avatar Spirit is eternal, but the Avatar is a living, breathing, caring soul. Just like the rest of us." Gyatso smiled, just a little wry. "As it happens, I was watching. And I believe I know what he should have explained."

Young eyes widened. "You do? Because it didn't make any sense!"

"It can," Gyatso assured him. "But to understand it, requires a demonstration." He held out a hand, palm up to catch the sunlight. "Love is like a flutter-hornet, perched in your hand."

"Um." Aang tugged at the neck of his uniform. "Isn't that kind of dangerous?"

Gyatso closed his hand, casting his palm into shadow. "Only if you try to make it stay."

"Oh." Aang's eyes were round. He jumped into the air, grin belying the dark shadows under his eyes. "Oh, I get it! I get it, I... think?"

"Tell me what you understand," Gyatso requested.

"Well, Katara's a waterbender! She can do all kinds of *whoosh* and crackle guys in ice and... um." Aang reined himself in with a sheepish grin. "Pakku tried to make her just be a healer, and she showed him. So... if I want to love her, I can't make her do stuff. Right?"

"That is part of it," Gyatso nodded. "You can always ask. But love must never be forced. It must be free. Part of its joy, what makes it worth being a grownup instead of a child, is knowing there is someone who chooses to be by your side. That choice is precious, Aang. Respect it, and you will be truly loved."

Aang bit his lip. "But the Elders didn't respect it, did they? They didn't want anyone to choose." He swallowed. "Master Gyatso. Was - was there something wrong in the Temples? I mean, really wrong?"

"Yes," Gyatso said simply. "Our teachings were twisted awry centuries ago, in the wake of Avatar Yangchen's death. She wished for us to live in peace, which was just. But Xiangchen's followers set out to make that wish a reality, without allowing other airbenders the choice."

"That's..." Aang looked down, a little pale. "That's wrong. Isn't it."

"It is," Gyatso nodded. "You wish to stop Fire Lord Ozai, so the Fire Nation ceases its bloodshed, and makes peace with its neighbors. That is not wrong. But you must not force them to *be* peaceful. That would destroy them, surely as a flutter-hornet in your fist."

"...I'm going to have to hurt a lot of them. To make them stop."

"That is the price of choice, and freedom," Gyatso said gently. "Aang. I, too, had many friends in the Fire Nation. Believe me when I say they would rather die free in war, than live as slaves to the Temple's peace. You must fight them, and you must win. But if you are to truly be the Avatar, you must see that the Fire Nation is one of the Four Nations. Painful as it may be to think, the urge to

war is as human as the urge to peace."

Aang's fingers almost reached to tear his hair out. "Then how can I *fix* this?"

"Wanting," Gyatso said sternly, "is not a problem to be fixed." He stared down his pupil. "When I told you the Elders could not make you do what you did not want, I did not mean you must do everything you wish to!"

Aang gaped. "But-"

"The Fire Nation may want to go to war all they wish," Gyatso went on. "What matters is that they do not do it! And they will not. Once it is clear that if they attempt to do so, there will be consequences."

"...Consequences?"

Oh dear. "Consequences," Gyatso affirmed. "When you ignored Jeong Jeong's instructions, you burned Katara and damaged Sokka's faith in you. Those are consequences."

"He didn't tell me I could hurt her!"

"You demanded to learn to shoot fire from your fingertips," Gyatso reminded him. "What did you think that would do, if not great harm to any who had the misfortune to be near?"

"...I thought it'd look really cool?" Aang shrugged. "You know. Like fireworks!"

"Fireworks are indeed cool," Gyatso agreed. "They are also incredibly dangerous. To use them unwisely is to risk a finger, a hand, a life! To firebend, you must be responsible. You must control yourself, so you may control your fire."

"Oh, sure." Aang rolled his eyes. "Because Zhao was *so* responsible."

"And is Zhao the sort of firebender you wish to be?" Gyatso asked shrewdly. "I think not."

"I'm not going to be a firebender at all," Aang said, adamant. "I'm the Avatar. I'm master of three elements. That's going to be more than enough to beat Ozai on the eclipse."

Impasse. Gyatso could feel it. As he could feel Aang's determination beating back the haze of exhaustion, hardening the walls between the living and the dead. "I hope that you are right, Aang. Yet even if you are wrong - I love you. I always have." One mortal heartbeat, Aang's own power chasing him from the world. "But remember, Aang! Remember the last Avatar who struck on the eclipse!"

"What?"

"Aang!" Sokka, bright to a spirit's eyes with his own quiet power as he gripped Aang's shoulder. "Are you okay? You've been mumbling for a while, and the ground around you got all mushy when you pulled some water up into it - what's going on? Can you hear me?"

"Of course I can hear you, I was just..." Aang glanced around the clearing, face crumpling in exhaustion and grief. "I thought I saw Gyatso."

Surrounded by spirit mists, Gyatso sighed.

"Yeah?" Sokka sounded surprisingly serious. "Maybe you did. Dad always told us, sometimes your ancestors come to visit before a big battle. It's supposed to be good luck." He smiled at Aang, all

confidence. "They remind you it's good to be alive. So you make sure you fight, and fight hard... but, you make sure you don't join them too fast. Got it?"

Aang's mouth dropped open. "You - you think he was really here? But - why did he go..."

"Ghosts can't stay," Sokka shrugged. "Even Temul couldn't hang around all the time. And she's a dragon-child." He squeezed Aang's shoulder.

Anchoring him to the living. Gyatso smiled. *You are far more than you appear.*

"The important thing is, he came," Sokka said firmly. "If he showed up out of the spirit world, even for a minute - he cares, Aang. Even now, he still cares."

"...Yeah." Aang wiped something wet away from dark-ringed eyes. "Thanks." He swallowed. "He wanted me to remember what happened when Avatar Kyoshi hit the Fire Nation capital on the eclipse."

"Huh." Sokka grimaced. "Damn it. If whoever got there before us hadn't burned the Fire Nation's part of Wan Shi Tong's library..." He flung up his hands in exasperation. Dropped them again, with a heartfelt sigh. "Come on, Aang. Get some sleep. It's going to be fine. Nothing happened to Kyoshi on the eclipse."

"No," Gyatso whispered, as the living world faded away. "Not to Kyoshi."

Chapter End Notes

Thank goodness for Gyatso. He loves the kid, even when Aang's being a brat. Frankly, I think any 12-going-on-13 kid heading into a battle should get to be a brat. But historically, it's only fairly recently that youngsters have been out of the line of fire in the West. Powder monkeys, cabin boys, drummers and messengers; often they were younger even than Aang. The difference is that they knew they could be going into battles. Aang wasn't raised that way. It's got to be like being a Quaker drafted for Viet Nam. Which some were. A lot of them volunteered for unarmed duties, including the very dangerous job of getting the wounded off the battlefield. I don't believe in pacifism, but anybody who deliberately goes into a war zone unarmed, knowing people will be trying to kill him, at least has the courage of his convictions. I respect that.

So on the one hand - yes, Aang's got every reason in the world to throw a tantrum, stick his fingers in his ears, and insist this whole mess is Somebody Else's Fault.

Which, in fact, it is. Several Somebody Elses.

Problem is, just because something is not your fault, doesn't mean it's not your responsibility.

Chapter 65

Chapter Notes

Azula warning. Not a lot of gore, but mindgames ahead!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Nothing happened to Kyoshi on the eclipse, Sokka told himself firmly, staring at the ships as Hakoda took over and rallied their friends the way a real leader did. The way he couldn't, yet.

Or maybe ever. He didn't know what his dad would do if he found out about Shu Jing and grabby ghosts, but at a guess, it'd probably start with a disappointed look and end with Hakoda, Master Piandao, and Temul in a three-way stare-down he had no idea who might win.

He'd like to bet on his dad. He really would. But up against Temul... Sokka had a bad feeling Hakoda would need help. And if he accepted help from Piandao, a Fire Nation swordmaster would treat that as a temporary alliance while a Water Tribe chief would see it as take the stronger enemy down first, and that just led all kinds of bad places.

If this was even a piece of what the Avatar was supposed to do, understand all nations so he could keep peace between all nations-

I never want to be Aang. Ever.

Good thing he didn't have to be. Because nothing was going to happen to Aang. They weren't going to let it. The world would be firebending-free for eight precious minutes, Agni's eyes blinded without a dragon there to see. Ozai could ambush the invasion all he wanted. For those eight minutes, the Fire Nation would be as helpless as any earthbender caught by Ty Lee.

Dragons don't do helpless. And they know it's coming.

Still. There wasn't anything the Fire Nation could do about it. The sun moved. Might as well think you were going to hold back the tide... well, if you weren't a waterbender. During the eclipse, no firebending. After, would be way too late.

So what could they do before the eclipse?

Not that much, Sokka reflected, skipping a fragment of glassy rock over the waves. Beef up the Gates of Azulon and other roadblocks on the way, sure. But he already had a plan for that-

"So what's your backup plan, hatchling?"

Sokka jumped, looking over his shoulder for a cranky ghost swordswoman. Though Temul hadn't shown up to thump him since Aang had started his little sleepless gig. He'd kind of expected her to start sneaking up on him again after they'd finally gotten Aang to sleep, but so far, no. It was just his imagination. And a bunch of bad memories. Sozin had been so *thorough*, searching for Air Nomad survivors. He'd marched men over mountains, combed every island, sent pearl-divers into neck-snapping waves to investigate rumors of odd noises in sea-caves. You name it, he and Azulon had searched it. And Iroh and Ozai after them, and Zuko and Azula after *them*. You could say a lot of things about the line of Sozin; most of them not good to even whisper around Gran-Gran, who

had a pretty low opinion of that kind of language. But one thing they were, was thorough.

Okay. So I'm an evil firehappy maniac, who knows there's an invasion coming on the one day that's really gonna suck. What do I do?

Um. Yeah. Huh...

"It's just another fight, youngster. Only a lot bigger."

Yeah, Temul probably would say something like that. So. Imagine it was a fight. Like sparring with Piandao. He was the invasion, and Ozai was the swordmaster-

Wait. That's not right.

The Day of Black Sun. No firebending. Ozai wouldn't be Piandao in this fight. *Aang* was.

Aang had the bending. He had the skills. He could probably take the Caldera apart by himself. But all he had to do was stop Ozai. One way or another.

It's the Fire Nation that's going to be weak. And they know it.

So if Ozai knew that, and knew how his people remembered Kyoshi shaming them, slapping the Fire Nation in the face with the fact that their lords had failed in their foremost duty, protecting their domain and their people-

Ozai couldn't fail that way. The Fire Lord *could not* fail that way. His people's loyalty would never survive it. And it was loyalty that made the war so awful. That held Fire Nation soldiers in the field, when a sane person would pack up and go home. Ozai didn't dare let that loyalty be threatened.

And if Aang shows up... even if the Avatar loses, which he won't, he was there. In the Fire Nation capital. Like Kyoshi.

Kyoshi, who'd set off a slow-burning rage that drove people like Zuko even today...

They get mad. But they don't believe in revenge. They go for lawful vendetta.

Okay. So what would be lawful for the Fire Lord and great name of the Caldera to do-

The great name of the Caldera. Oh no.

They'd thought about beating Fire Lord Ozai. They'd *planned* on beating the Fire Lord. But Sozin's line was also the lords of the Caldera. They had a responsibility to their people.

He can't let Aang attack his people. Not if he's got any way to stop it.

Grimacing, Sokka poked around for another flat rock. And yipped, yanking his fingers back just before he would have slashed them on something blue, shiny, and very very sharp. *Great. Somebody lost a glass net float and didn't bother sending a diver after...*

Divers. The Fire Nation had divers.

Water's warm here. Anybody can swim.

They were camped in this cove because it was safe. You either had to come through the water, or down sheer cliffs. Warships couldn't get near them without a betraying plume of black smoke.

But what if there isn't any smoke?

Near one of the seaward ships, something splashed.

Gray, Sokka registered. *And pale, and dark, and... that's not a fish!* "Katara! Get the swampbenders, we need-"

The world exploded.

"Early," Azula commented, crouched low near the edge of the bluffs as she and a tall, gray-eyed onmitsu watched the unfolding chaos. By eye, not spyglass; the chance of the barbarians below spying a lens-flash was just too great. Even though the warning she and Agent Bolin were truly worried about wouldn't have come from one particular bender *seeing* them.

"You ordered Deai's divers to use their discretion if they found anything unusual about the Water Tribe vessels," Anshin reminded her. "I would say they found something."

Azula caught her lip between her teeth; forced herself to release it before the next round of explosions battered stone and sea. *I wish Ty Lee was here.*

But she wasn't, still convalescing after those terrible minutes when her heart would beat, but her lungs simply would not move on their own...

"*You breathed for one of ours,*" Anshin had said, when he'd presented himself and his partners to join her desperate scheme. "*Your Way deserves our consideration.*"

Mai is with Ty Lee, Azula told herself now. *Mai will keep her safe.*

Azula planned to rejoin them both soon, assuming she survived this. And then, perhaps, Anshin and the others who'd been won over by Ty Lee's survival would help her turn her burning fury on the onmitsu Elders who deserved it.

Until then, the invasion would simply have to do.

"The blasts should have deafened the earthbenders' feet," Anshin observed. "Lieutenant Chian's force is prepared, and Kotori's squad should be moving on the waterbenders... *now.*"

Hands clapped over her aching ears, Toph tried to make sense of the shaking mess that was the beach. Ji the Mechanist had brought blasting jelly; right now, that seemed like a really, really bad idea-

Someone's on the cliffs.

It was like trying to pick out a scatter of ants in the middle of dancing komodo-rhinos. But she was sure. "Guys! Something's coming down the cliffs!"

"The Boulder believes the cliffs are the least of our problems-" The Rumble runner-up took a dramatic stance, hand raised to shade his eyes. "The Boulder doesn't remember inviting pretty ladies to this party."

"Pretty-?" Toph's voice died in her throat. There was something. Something prickly in the air. Something she'd felt before, twice-

"Sokka! Azula!"

Dad!

If he'd had more time to think, they probably both would have been dead. As it was, Sokka saw Azula swooping her arms, charge gathering-

Iroh took out General Gang, lords go for the leader-!

Sokka hurled his sword.

Lightning smashed it from the air.

Thrown from his feet by the blast, Haokda rolled over sand to fetch up by him. "That can't be Iroh!"

Poking his head up enough to see if his sword had stopped smoking - nope, not yet - Sokka gave his father a pained smile. "Dad? Meet Zuko's little sister."

Lighting cracked again, exploding the mast of a ship that had apparently been unscathed. The remnants of wood crackled into fire, and Appa's panicked bellow rumbled across the cove.

Hakoda looked at the wreck that had been an organized invasion, and swore. "That explains so much."

They can't be here. Katara pulled a frothing wave out of the explosion-tossed sea, sent it surging to sweep flaming bits away from one ship still intact. *They just can't!*

But they were, and she couldn't stop wondering when Shidan had betrayed them. The night they'd met? Or had he waited until he was sure where Aang would be, first?

So much for Toph's lie-detecting feet. Never trust a firebender!

But Aang had. Poor Aang; he was darting around Appa, trying to calm the bison down as flames crackled higher. And she could understand that, really. Appa was his best friend. But they could use a little help here-

Dainty fists came out of nowhere. Katara barely slapped them away with a water whip in time. *Ty Lee!*

No. The girl in wet dark reds and grays looked a lot like Ty Lee. Moved like Ty Lee. But there was a seriousness to her round face the acrobat had never had. She seemed older.

And she wasn't alone. There were other bodies surging out of the surf, heading for the swampbenders in a flurry of flung knives and cartwheels.

In the water! Katara scythed her hands up, waves freezing with bodies locked inside. There a head, there a hand, there only a darkness of wet hair in ice-

Face pale, the wet girl charged.

Azula saw ice spread, and cursed it. *They're going to die. I'm going to lose them-*

Set it aside. Focus on the plan. Or they really would all die.

She glanced at the one mini-trebuchet they'd been able to assemble, and nodded. "Fire."

"Calm down, buddy," Aang tried to soothe his best friend as explosions shook air and sand. "It's just a little fire. You can take it."

The burning, tar-slathered stone landed almost under Appa's nose. With a pained roar, the bison launched skyward.

How can this be happening?

Glider snapped open, Aang soared up into the sky; maybe if he was up there with Appa, his friend would calm down. And maybe he could see what the heck was going on. Besides ships blowing up. How had the whole Fire Army just appeared out of nowhere-

It's not the whole army. Aang dropped at least ten feet in shock. *It's... not a lot of people at all.*

There were maybe a couple dozen men and women in the light armor of the Home Guard; half sailing down ropes just far enough to toss fireballs into the camp, the other half hitting the beach with swords drawn, charging the green-and-leather of the Foggy Swamp. The swampbenders turned to the ocean to strike back, melting the ice Katara had locked over the edge of the sea-

Maybe a dozen more people in wet gray and red surged out of melting ice; two dragging limp companions who'd been locked under water, the rest heading for the swampbenders in familiar, bouncing jumps and cartwheels. One of them was already striking at Katara, dodging water-tentacles with blinding speed.

From the top of the cliffs, Azula and a tall, thin man in gray watched the chaos.

She's just watching? Why isn't she fighting?

Gold eyes met his. Narrowed.

Deliberately, Azula turned back toward the battlefield. As if he weren't even there.

Hey! I'm the Avatar!

Aang dove to snatch Appa's reins, landing on the bison's neck. He had to bend to stop Azula, and that was just a little tricky if he had to hang onto a glider.

She wasn't even looking at him.

Well, that's going to change! Determined, Aang whirled his glider-staff like a wheel to gather the wind, then slashed it across. That gust of wind would smash Zuko against a wall, so Azula would-

The pair below simply - stepped apart. Wind tugged at Azula's pinned hair, and at the strange man's loose clothes. That was all.

She's not even looking at me! How did she do that?

It didn't really matter. She was the leader. Stop her, and he'd stop all the fighting. All the dying; he could see blood flowing, even so far below. It made his heart hurt.

I am so sick of everybody wanting to kill each other. This is going to stop. Now!

Aang leapt off Appa's neck, knifing down through the air; staff guiding all the wind following him

into one massive *swat*.

Azula didn't move. She just took it, wind blasting her along the cliff edge, scraping her over stone and earth until elegant black and gold armor was a wreck of tattered uniform and earth.

Aang dropped to the rocky edge, landing light as a feather. *She was smiling...*

Knuckles impacted his side and back, fast as a woodpecker's drumming beak. The staff fell from limp fingers.

What-

His knees wouldn't hold him up.

-just-

The ground came up, hard.

-happened?

He couldn't move. He could breathe, and blink. But he couldn't *move*.

"Princess!"

The stranger who'd hit him. Who was just stepping past Aang like he didn't have to worry anymore. Like Azula was the most important thing in the world.

"Anshin." Azula was coughing, breathing a bit raspy. "Good work."

"You should have allowed one of my agents to take the blow-"

"No." Confidence seeped back into Azula's rough voice. "He had to see what he wanted to see. For an innocent monk, he really does hate me." She chuckled, leaning against Anshin to walk into Aang's view. "Of course, I've actually tried to kill him. I suppose it's only fair."

"You..." Aang swallowed, tried again. "You're not going to win. We're going to stop you!"

"Really?" Azula's smile was a white slash in the mask of dust. "How? You can't even move, much less bend."

Aang gulped air. "Appa-"

Without looking, Azula whirled, punching out a ball of fire. The bison bellowed, swerving frantically back up into the air.

"He's afraid of fire." Azula turned back to him with a smirk. "I made sure of that."

"You... *monster*..."

"Oh, you and my mother should sit down to tea." Teeth gleamed in her smile. "Why, that's such a *hurtful* thing to say. I didn't know you had it in you." She chuckled. "Maybe this war's doing some good after all."

"How can you say things like that?" Aang burst out. "You - you're not even human!"

Azula looked down at him, gold gaze utterly still.

Anshin was just as cold, eyeing him the way Momo would a particularly tasty bug. "He would be easily disposed of, your highness."

"What? Kill him for telling the truth? Where do you think we are, court?" Azula's smile was wry. "No. I appreciate the offer, but I planned exactly what I want from this moment. And I intend to get it." One lazy blink of gold eyes, and her smile widened into a croon. "Do you have any idea what I'm going to do to you, little Avatar?"

Sokka, Aang prayed, staring up at her like a rabbiroo caught by a scorpion-viper. He couldn't move. *You've got to get up here, buddy. Katara... Toph... anybody!*

"I'm going to do..." Azula's smile made the air seem to tremble, afraid. "*Nothing.*"

What?

"Here you are. Perfectly safe, while your allies fight and die, hoping the *Avatar* will come save them." Azula never looked away. "Only he won't, will he? Because right now, you're not the Avatar. Not a master bender. Not even the last airbender. You're *none* of the things that matter so much to you. And to everyone else. You're just a broken, sad little boy, crying for someone to come save you. Only no one's going to save you. The world doesn't care about hurt little boys who can't even bend." Her voice dropped to a whisper, as if imparting a wonderful secret. "Believe me. I know!"

She's crazy. She's just... crazy...

"Of course, the chi-block will wear off. Eventually. But there's only so much time before the eclipse, isn't there? Do you *really* think you can take my father in a fair fight? I don't." Her voice was light, almost playful. "After all, you've never fought fair. And why should you? You're the Avatar. Fair is for everyone else."

Aang tried to shudder. She was wrong. Just - wrong. "That's not true!"

"Isn't it?" Something dark moved behind her eyes. "You were going to turn your pet barbarians loose in a city of innocent people. *My* city. You were going to make us fight and die when Agni himself would have no way to see our fear, or our courage. You were going to let pirate raiders - oh, just ask Chief Hakoda what he does to seaside colonies! - loose on the streets of my city." A trace of steam wafted from her breath. "You call the Fire Nation monsters and murderers for attacking other nations, and then you come *here*. So what does that make you?" Her voice was teasing, but her gaze cut like razors. "Have you even thought about it?"

"You started this war!" Aang burst out. "And I'm going to stop it!"

"Ooo. I'm *so scared*." Azula stepped back. "You should enjoy this time. It should make you feel *so* much closer to Sokka." She cocked her head. "Do you think you'll tell him that? Or will you tell him the truth? That you *hate* not being able to bend. That it makes you feel ruined. Useless. *Worthless*." She smiled again. "Oh, I hope you do. Because if that's how you feel about yourself, when you know you'll get your bending back... then what do you feel about him?"

"You're lying," Aang got out. But he didn't know, he couldn't tell - but she had to be! "That's not true!"

"Isn't it? You didn't stay in Ba Sing Se, when the whole world needed the Avatar, looking for *Sokka*." Azula *tsked*. "Of course, I understand. Appa's a stupid, brute beast - but at least he's an airbender. He *matters*."

"It wasn't like that!" It wasn't true! Appa was - was- "You're horrible! How can you live like this? You're lying *all the time!*"

"My, my. That's *just* what my brother used to say." Azula smiled over her shoulder. "And look what the world did to him."

Smiling, she walked away.

"You can't do this! You can't!" Aang tried to struggled upright; couldn't even get his fingers to twitch. "Azula! *Azula!*"

Her laughter danced in the wind.

She's good. Katara held her sore left arm a little closer to her side, as her opponent ducked yet another razor slash of water. *Really good.*

But chi-blocking only worked if you could get close enough to use it. Maybe a few of the swampbenders had made that mistake, but the rest were busily gathering a wave to pummel their odd attackers-

Her own buzzing little gnat glanced up at the cliffs, and suddenly back-flipped away. "I knew it!" Katara yelled. "You never stand up to a real fight!"

Gray eyes cut toward her, then went back to the whips she was dodging. "The princess was right. You barbarians can't even read a map."

Barbarians? Who's she calling - what, does she think we're lost? Katara fumed, shattering her whips to fill the air with needles of ice. "Tell Azula I'm onto her sick little family. When we get done with her, her lying grandfather's next!"

"Her *grandfather*-" Ice studded the acrobat's clothes; but she crumpled into a flexible ball, rolled under a razor-disk of ice, and smiled despite the blood. "Thank you. We've never had *proof* Shidan was a traitor."

What? Wait - why is she heading toward the water-?

A bloodied hand fisted as the acrobat flipped, opening to toss something round and black and familiar-

Smoke bombs!

Black clouds erupted across the beach; Katara covered her mouth and nose against a peppery bite that made her eyes water. Darn it, where was Toph, she wouldn't be bothered...

An odd, mechanical buzzing. Katara knew that sound. *Water-riders!*

Fire Nation metal, but just as fragile as any ship in ice. If she could only *see* it.

I don't have to see it, if I know where it is. She grabbed for the waves nearest the splashing, and *pulled.*

More blasts rocked the water, shattering her ice even as it formed. There was a yelp or two from the depths of the smoke, but Katara could hear the riders still moving; one loud, and getting louder-

Got you!

Water closed like her fist, pulling the noise down in a sucking gurgle. Katara dragged it deeper, jouncing over the seabed, over and over like washboard surf. *Attack my tribe, will you?*

A minute. Long enough. She pulled a metal-tangled wave up onto the beach in front of her, out of the thinning smoke...

It's empty?

Score one thing for sand, Toph thought, snapping bits of lightning-melted beach off Sokka's sword with a flick of her fingers. *It makes really cool glass*. "Sokka! Where's Aang?"

"You can't feel him?"

"No!" And that was wrong, just *wrong*. Aang bounced around like a freaked-out cricket-mouse. Even when he was meditating, his heart and breathing fluttered like a running brook. "I heard Azula throwing lightning from the top of the cliff, and Appa went that way, and everything's blowing up!" And her ears *hurt*. If Sokka's sword had been regular steel instead of space rock, she wasn't even sure she would have found *him*-

Be rock, Toph told herself. *You gotta be strong. Everybody needs you*.

Chief Hakoda's hand brushed her shoulder; solid and reassuring, yeah, but she could take care of *herself*. She *could*. "We'll find him." His voice turned rueful. "Though now I wish we'd brought a little less blasting jelly."

"Blasting-" Sokka stopped short, boots biting into the sand. "Where's the Mechanist?"

"I've got him!" Katara moved out of the fuzzy rumble of sand, unfamiliar feet stumbling behind her.

"Yes, thank you, I'm all right," Ji agreed. "And so are you! Using metal to intercept lightning - amazing! It would seem the princess missed what she came for."

"No." Chief Hakoda sounded grim. "She missed me. She didn't miss what she came for."

Sand twitched around Katara's feet, bits scattering as they suddenly dried. "Dad. We're all *fine*."

"Our family is fine," Hakoda corrected her. "Our invasion is a wreck. Just look."

Toph puffed salt-sticky bangs out of her face, and sidled over to Sokka. "Want to tell me what I'm *looking* at?"

"Azula had divers in the water," Sokka bit out. "They paid for it, but... most of the ships are burning. Looks like some of the subs are blown, too." He shuddered. "And most of the Home Guard who came after us didn't make it back up the cliffs. I think the Earth Army's chasing the ones that did."

"She got all these people killed for *nothing*," Katara said angrily. "We know chi-blocking wears off!"

Azula brought onmitsu? Toph felt chilled. *Not good*.

"Oh no," Sokka muttered. "Toph! We have to get up those cliffs."

"They could still be up there," Hakoda objected.

"I know," Sokka said grimly. "So what's the worst place Aang could possibly be?"

Chapter End Notes

Before anybody jumps me about Aang, remember two things. 1) *Azula always lies*. 2) The most damaging lies are those with a high amount of truth.

Since a lot of you have asked... I've only seen a few minutes of one episode of "Legend of Korra", and I don't anticipate seeing more any time soon. So if you think you see something from LoK reflected in Embers, it's more likely convergent evolution than anything else. (Though, Zhao's Seal of Approval... snrk.)

Some may recognize inspiration from "Pennsic War IV" in this chapter. "And an ambushed ambush isn't very nice..."

Chapter 66

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Well." Bato kept his voice low as he glanced toward the youngsters gathered around Aang. "At least he's stopped babbling."

"At least he's alive," Hakoda reminded his friend. Yes, the boy was a chatterbox at the best of times, and this had been one of the worst days Hakoda could remember in the past five years. But talking things to death was apparently how the boy had been raised. What else did everyone expect? "If I'd been left paralyzed while my friends were fighting and dying around me, I'd be a wreck, too."

"The men aren't going to see it that way," Bato warned him. "There's already talk that this is the second time Azula's left him alive. That he'd rather let her shame him than fight; Air Nomads are supposed to be peaceful, after all. That if he can't even handle the Fire Princess..."

How can he defeat the Fire Lord? Hakoda finished silently. "He barely survived her the first time. She did this on purpose, Bato! The Fire Nation doesn't have to fight us if we fall apart now."

"Earth Kingdom soldiers are supposed to believe the princess did all this?" Bato said skeptically. "Hakoda, *we* wouldn't die following a fourteen-year-old girl. Why would anyone else?"

"The Fire Nation-"

"Is *different*. I know," Bato nodded. "It took a while, but you and Sokka finally got that through my head. But most people... Hakoda, you can step *outside* the Water Tribe when you look at things. Sokka, too. It's useful, but it worries people. They don't understand it. I don't either," he admitted, glancing down over the cliff edge as yet another barrel of blasting jelly cooked off on one of the ruined ships. "But I know you. No matter how you look at things, you're still one of our tribe. Most of these people... they don't know you. They won't believe what you see. They came for a straight smash at the Fire Lord, and now it's gone to pieces. And the Avatar's gone to pieces right with it. They'll want someone to blame, and the Fire Nation *knows* where we are. We need a new plan, and we need it fast. Before more of those mountain-climbing lunatic Home Guards show up. If we can't get off this island, they won't have to bring the Army. They can just eat away at us like the tide."

True enough. Damn. "This is still our best chance," Hakoda said firmly. "Azula's counting on us to lose heart. To turn on each other-"

"Well, it's working."

"We're stronger than that." Hakoda swept his gaze over everyone in earshot. "We're all stronger than that, or we wouldn't have come this far. We want our nations back. We want to finish this war." He gave them a fierce smile. "We're on the Fire Lord's own doorstep. It'd be a shame if we didn't knock."

"And I'm going to do the knocking."

All eyes went to Aang. Who was standing, even if Sokka and Katara were pressed suspiciously close to him.

"Avatar Aang." Hakoda kept every trace of doubt off his face. "We're going to have to adjust the plan."

Behind them all, Toph looked like she wanted to wince.

"Chi-blocking wears off. I'll be fine by the time we get there." Face pale, Aang swallowed, and forged on. "Azula finds what you care about, so she can try to destroy it. Well, I'm not going to let her destroy us! This isn't Fire Lord Ozai's world. It's *our* world, and we're going to take it back!"

"We broke into the Earth King's palace," Sokka said, confidence in every inch of that straight stance. "We can break into this one."

But the Earth King didn't want you hurt. And you know it. A thousand other objections sprang to Hakoda's mind. Deliberately, he squashed them all. *This is still our best chance.* "We're right behind you," Hakoda said, as confident as his son. "You heard them, everyone. Let's make this happen."

"Of all the blockheaded, foolhardy, idealistic-" Azula cut herself off as the bison soared into the air, keeping the rest of her curses behind her teeth. Manners. A great name had to have manners, even in the face of idiocy that would make a slugworm blush for shame.

I did what you asked, brother dear, Azula thought dryly. *I considered whether the Avatar's survival would be good for our nation. I created a plan that should have insured the little brat did make it. And now he's going to throw that chance away in a feckless assault on the Caldera.* "I guess we're going to have to live with a Water Tribe Avatar after all."

Behind her, Agent Bolin cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, your highness."

"Why?" Azula let her lip curl in wry amusement. "It's not your fault a hundred and twelve-year-old Avatar has the common sense the spirits gave cave shrimp."

"No, your highness," the Dai Li agreed, keeping watchful earth-shod feet firmly on the ground to track the roving onmitsu as they gathered up any surviving Home Guard stragglers. Especially to track onmitsu leader Anshin. "But it's always annoying when the guest of honor doesn't even admit you threw him a party."

"I suppose it's just as well," Azula shrugged. "The Fire Lord would have been so put out if the Avatar missed the eclipse." She gazed toward the sea, calculating numbers and equipment. "Now they have wounded, and they've lost all but two of their ships. Not to mention half of those odd metal submersibles Deai's people found. They have to decide; do they take the wounded with them, or evacuate? Either way, they lose some of their manpower. Assuming they can fit everyone on the boats in the first place; though with the numbers of rock-headed Earth soldiers still chasing us, they just might fit. They could use the submersibles to bring anyone who can't fit - but then their waterbenders will come to the fight exhausted.

"But there's something even more important than that." Azula met her agent's eyes squarely. "Honor."

"No one's suggested you were lacking in honor, your highness."

"I wasn't talking about my honor." She glanced toward her regrouping force. Battered and bloody, and they'd lost so many... but their eyes were bright, and fierce. "Look at them, Agent. These are the veterans too old and wounded for the front lines. The reserve, who spend their days watching for pirates, searching for lost fishermen, and diving after what the storms leave behind. Not the

Army. Not the Navy. The Home Guard. And they fought the Avatar, and won." Azula smiled, shoving any doubts to the back of her mind. "Now, no matter what happens in the Caldera, *we warned them*. The Avatar knows we'll fight to the death." Her smile twisted. "Let's see if he still has the stomach for it."

"Not hungry?"

Kneeling on the tent's ground-cloth, Xiu pushed her half-eaten bowl of jook aside without looking at Sergeant Bo. The tent walls around them were only green cloth, but they weighed on her mind like a curtain of lead. Almost as heavy as the knowledge of the growing collection of messages in General Fong's custody. Not that Xiu had had the chance to read them, but soldiers did talk. Especially when the messages were left tied to trees, came wafting down out of the sky, or - at least once - were shot into the general's camp flagpole.

Esteemed General Fong,

You are approaching the domain of Dragons' Wings (see attached) and territory under the wings of the Northern Air Temple. There is no one here you need to fight. Most of us are noncombatants. It would be best for all concerned if you halt your march and send a messenger to parley.

If you choose not to negotiate, I will be forced to consider you hostile.

-Zuko, son of Ursa and Fire Lord Ozai, Lord of Dragons' Wings.

Xiu had a hard enough time thinking of Lee as the Fire Lord's son, much less anybody who would call generals *hostile*. But apparently the first message had also come with a map, a copy of the Earth King's treaty, stamped and sealed, and a request for parley in a scarily formal style of calligraphy that still seemed to make the younger lieutenants shiver.

And Sergeant Bo had told her the tales of what had happened to General Gang.

But Fong's not listening.

No. She wasn't hungry at all. "I guess after a couple of weeks as a general's *guest*, it starts getting old."

Finishing off his own bowl, the sergeant shrugged. "Eh, you get used to it." A quick grin. "The army food, anyway. Don't know about being a guest. Never stuck around in the stockade that long." He looked at shadows dancing through the fabric. "Heads up. Incoming general."

Xiu dusted off her dress, not bothering to rise. If Fong wasn't going to respect her enough to give her a straight answer, instead of mealy-mouthed platitudes of 'it's for the greater good' and 'the worst burns are those you don't feel', then she'd be damned if she'd-

Is that buzzing?

It was. Definitely. Xiu shot to her feet, hands out by her sides and ready to move. Nothing buzzed like an angry scorpion-bee. Unless it was a hive of them, and the buzzing coming nearer sounded like a *lot* of them.

"Duck," Sergeant Bo advised.

The tent-flap was flung back, and a furious, honey-smeared, scorpion-bee-stung general and his aides stalked in.

Don't laugh, Xiu told herself, keeping her face frozen with an act of will as a stray scorpion-bee buzzed over to her abandoned bowl. *Don't laugh, oh spirits...*

Sergeant Bo snickered.

The glare General Fong leveled his way froze Xiu to the bone.

Maybe you were safer with Chief Hakoda... no, don't kid yourself. You were safer with the Water Tribe. Even when they wanted to chain Lee up and hand him over.

Silk-weavers had to deal with all kinds of people, especially nobles. Generally, they came in two varieties. The ones that accepted power as a fact of life, so they didn't have to worry about a laugh or two. And the ones that... didn't.

"I don't understand why the pair of you haven't been more cooperative." Even stung and furious, Fong still sounded reasonable. "We have a Fire Nation canker infesting Earth Kingdom land. The only cure is to cut it out."

"Huh." Sergeant Bo looked oddly unsubdued. "Maybe I'm just an old campaigner, but I could've sworn the people back forty, fifty years ago didn't call this Earth Kingdom land at all. Sir."

"The dead claim no kingdoms." General Fong's gaze never left Xiu. "Who do you think you're protecting by your silence?"

Maybe my own sanity? Because if I have to listen to one more of your bungled mash-ups of Kyoshi's "we will fight them on the beaches" speech, I'm going to tear my own hair out. "I've told you everything I know," Xiu said, leaning on her grandmother's habit of frozen civility. "The Fire Nation Ship worked out a truce with the Water Tribe-"

"Impossible!" one of Fong's aides declared. Ro, she thought his name was. "There can be no peace while the boots of the Fire Nation stride our land."

"Call it whatever you want, then. They weren't shooting each other," Xiu stated. "I don't know why, I don't know how long it lasted, and I don't know anything about any forged land grants. If it's forged. It looks like the Earth King's seal to me."

"The Fire Nation has taken Ba Sing Se," Fong declared. "Any decree of the Earth King's must be considered suspect until he takes his rightful throne once more." He drew himself up to his full height, proud hair brushing the top of the tent, not at all daunted by the fact she could look him straight in the eye. "And you expect me to believe your father sent you alone and unchaperoned to investigate *silk opportunities*?"

"I was traveling with Sergeant Bo," Xiu said, for what felt like the hundredth time. "My father was in the same unit as he was years ago. It's perfectly appropriate. And why not? The war disrupts all the usual trade routes, and it's damn hard to raise moths when lords and generals fine us for cutting tree branches, and fine us again if we don't grow rice for the Army. My family owns *hills*! Places that aren't meant to grow rice! Cut down the trees, and the whole slope would wash downstream. We're not nobles. We have to pay the tax somehow. A new source of silk threads, where the trees aren't getting trampled over? New designs? Trade? This is a chance to make *deals*, General." And a chance to get as far from Huizhong as reasonably possible until she could stop crying herself to sleep at night. Her father had approved.

Say that much for Fong. Since she'd been picked up as his guest, she hadn't cried about her ex-fiancé anymore.

Dark eyes narrowed, and Fong leaned in. "What you call trade, I call conspiring with the enemy."

"Lee wasn't anybody's enemy." Xiu wanted to be defiant, but she couldn't help shaking. She'd seen the general stomp a field into quicksand to suck down farmers who didn't want to cooperate with his quartermasters. Yes, he'd let them back out again. Yes, they'd been given credit slips with the backing of the Earth Kingdom for every last bag of grain. Yes, most farmers didn't take that kind of prodding to contribute to the Army; they wanted to win the war, after all.

But if Ba Sing Se's fallen - you can't eat paper in winter.

"I'd heard the Fire nobles can be unnaturally persuasive. I hadn't believed..." The general crossed armored arms, regarding her like a puzzle that refused to be solved. "Don't you realize what those scum will do to you? You know what they are. Their so-called honor rules everything they do, and you saw their prince as a lowly peasant. You'll be lucky if they just execute you. Do you want to be a chained slave? Think of your parents! How could you return to them if you'd been disgraced?"

Xiu couldn't help but shudder. That wasn't something she wanted to think about, ever. But her father had told her two things. Fight. And *survive*.

"Now, General, sometimes you've got to give even a demon his due," Sergeant Bo spoke up. "The Dragon of the West was one damn ruthless killer when we were on the battlefield, but he didn't let things off the field slide. Long as a woman didn't wave a dagger at him, he wouldn't touch her. None of his men would, either."

"You know it's not General Iroh who's in command over there, Sergeant," Ro snapped, prodding one of his many stings. "Would any honorable general have done this?"

Xiu blinked. Let her gaze slide to an indignant scorpion-bee who'd sampled her jook and decided no decent bug would have anything to do with the stuff. "You mean, they're not just swarming?" *Don't laugh. Don't laugh...*

"This is not a *prank*," Fong's eyes blazed. "We've lost men. Most casualties, but some of them were stung *fatally*. We've lost equipment. Supplies, when the hive went after the pack beasts and they ran. No honorable commander does this! And you're a tradesman, you have to know the hidden passes-"

"General!" A muddy, wide-eyed messenger skidded to a halt in the opening, dripping gobbets of gray muck. "Lieutenant Han's compliments, sir, and there's a problem up the trail!"

The general gathered his aides with a look, and stomped out.

Xiu's nose twitched. She wrinkled it, and got another acrid waft of scent. "Brimstone?"

Frowning, Sergeant Bo picked up a stray glob of clay. Rolled it between his fingers, and took his own sniff. "Well, damn."

That sounded like real worry. "What is it?" Xiu asked, shoulders knotted with tension as she dipped her head for a better look.

"You better not know until we tell the general," the old veteran said gravely. "You gotta be surprised." Bushy white brows scrunched down, grim. "Brace yourself, little lady. Looks like Prince Zuko's decided Fong's not gonna back down."

She had a queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. "So... what does that mean?"

Sergeant Bo's eyes were dark. "Means he's through playing nice. Come on."

"Come on?" Xiu echoed in disbelief, following despite herself. "You mean, go past the-" On the threshold, she stopped with a squeak, eyes crossing at the gleam off one of the guards' swords.

"Yeah, yeah, you're following orders, all neat and proper," Sergeant Bo said testily. "Wake up, Private. Your commander's about to jump straight into the soup, and we need to go yank him out."

"What's so scary about some smelly mud?" Xiu demanded, fed up with the whole ridiculous mess.

"Heh." Bo grinned at her; more bared teeth than anything happy. "Weaver, right? Not a potter." He eyed the guards again. "We got shrink-swell clays up ahead."

"Yes, sir," the nearest said staunchly. "The general's aware of that."

"Yeah, but does he know they've got-"

Xiu felt it more than heard it. An agonizing rumble that went straight to her bones, capped with distant crunching cracks that were decades-old trees snapping like matchsticks.

"...Waterbenders," the sergeant groaned. "Ah, damn it." Without looking, he pointed at Xiu. "Stay."

"But I can," Xiu started.

"No."

"But I'm not-"

"No." The sergeant's eyes were bleak. "You don't want to see this. And you need to get ready to pull out any maps you got." He heaved a sigh. "The general's going to want an alternate route."

"Oma and Shu." Shirong crouched by Zuko's side, the pair of them just another muddy brown shadow among standing trees on the crest of an untouched hill. "I never would have believed it could go so fast."

"Volcanic clays." *I don't want to look.* Zuko could still feel the underground water that had answered his call, flooding upward against earth's pull to soak hill-slopes deeper than rain could ever manage. Still not enough to dislodge clay from the grip of deep oakpine roots, but add a little judicious prying from a Dai Li and the weight of marching feet from Fong's forward division, not to mention the tricky work he and some other earthbenders had pulled off *under* the trail... "They use clay like that on Ember Island for beauty treatments. Slip on some somebody's dropped in the hall - believe me, you don't forget it."

I don't want to look. But I have to.

Chaos. Organized chaos; and the part of him that stayed cold and calculating even when things were blowing up in his face recognized that Fong was much, *much* better than Gang at this. Fong's commanders already had earthbenders up here to shove the top engulfing layer of clay aside, and give anybody whose throat wasn't already clogged with muck a fighting chance.

There weren't that many who did.

"And I wouldn't have believed clay could seal well enough to keep the trail from collapsing into your water-pits." Shirong's voice had the same clinical edge Uncle Iroh used to discuss melting steel in critical locations. Sabotage was an ugly way to fight, meaning a good commander had to

know about it, in case it was used against him.

Or just in case. Zuko swallowed. "I was almost hoping it wouldn't. If he'd decided to just go around this valley, he would have lost time. That would have been enough."

"When you're fighting spirits, you don't fight fair. Because they won't," Shirong said quietly. "I've never seen that applied to humans before." He grimaced. "I don't like it."

"Good. Keep reminding me of that."

Under the mud, Shirong gave him a sharp look.

Zuko's lips curled in a bitter smirk. "I spent three years crossing the world and getting nowhere. Now - I'm getting somewhere." He looked down at the distant bodies sprawled in clay, almost indistinguishable from the mud-smeared logs that had crushed them. "I need to remember this isn't how I want to do it." He stared over the wrecked pass, thinking of the divisions as yet untouched. "We should have killed more of them. Enveloped with the Yu Yan, and hit them with everything we had. We're not going to get another free shot."

Shirong sputtered. "You - of all the - make *sense*, would you?"

"Try asking the Mechanist's people to make sense," Zuko grumbled. "We keep telling them, Fong's not backing down. What do they say? *Give him more time*. When one determined earthbender can destroy every crop we have-" He cut himself off, trying not to snarl. "Well, Fong's had enough *time*. He didn't leave when we asked nicely. He didn't leave when we set the scorpion-bees on him. If he doesn't leave now..."

"And if Teo and the rest ask for more time?" Shirong asked, very carefully.

Zuko smirked, cold and determined. "Then we point out that the next place Fong is likely to move through are *their relatives'* farms. How badly do they want to eat this year?"

"...You did that on purpose." Shirong drew back, startled. "That's-"

"The Air Nomads died," Zuko said deliberately, "because they thought everything that happened on the lowlands *wasn't their problem*." He let out a hissing breath. "They can be Air Nomads, and rot up there on that mountain. Or they can be good neighbors who just *happen* to be airbenders, and help. They're not the Temple, we're not paying tribute, and we are *not* their damn shield-wall. They're in this fight, or they're *out*. I've had enough."

Quiet movement shivered the brush near them; Sergeant Kyo faded out of the bushes, brown mottling his armor. "Sir. Some of their scouts are getting a little close."

I don't want to be here, either. But this was his responsibility. "Did they find the note?"

"Sir." The sergeant gave him a *look*.

"Right. Coming."

Fong would find the latest letter, or he wouldn't. Either way, the trap below ought to give the message loud and clear.

I tried asking nicely.

Even with this blow, Fong had more soldiers than Dragons' Wings had people. He had to whittle

that army down. Any way he could.

Which means Low War. I don't care if Uncle doesn't like it.

...And the time to worry about that was after they were clear of Fong's scouts. Now was time to fall back, watch which way Fong decided to go, and put the finishing touches on what they'd set up for Fong's most likely routes.

And hope Huojin doesn't kill me. Even if Luli volunteered.

A few more marines fell in as they retreated, Rikiya humming under his breath. Zuko stifled a snort of laughter. Caught Shirong's questioning glance, and mouthed, *Explain later.*

Hopefully, *later* would be where Shirong could break a few rocks and burn things without drawing a whole army down on their heads. The Dai Li was upset enough with the reality of Low War. Knowing the Fire Nation wrote songs about it...

I don't get people, but even I know that's not going to go over well.

He really hoped Fong paid attention, this time.

Next time, I'm bringing the rattle-vipers.

Chapter End Notes

The song Rikiya is humming is "Snare and Deadfall," by Mercedes Lackey.

Shrink-swell clays are not uncommon in soils of volcanic origin. They do Exactly What It Says On The Tin: shrink when dry, swell enormously when wet. They also become very slippery and heavy. Farming them isn't the best idea if you have other options, which is one reason Fong had a clear line of march that way.

In this day and age it can be easy to forget how much geology affects war. If you want some interesting history and espionage reading, look up the preparations for D-Day, which included extensive efforts to get soil samples from Normandy beaches to determine if landing troops would be feasible. If you want to see an intersection of geology, war, and politics - well, keep reading, because apparently some French generals tried to divvy up invasion duties not by which forces should attack the appropriate targets, but by different grades of wine-growing country. Seriously. Their intent was that the British and American forces would move through low-grade wine areas, while French troops took the high-quality wine growing grounds. Roosevelt, Churchill, and Eisenhower were Not Amused. (Patton's thoughts on the subject were probably unprintable.)

If you're looking for some interesting books on soil, culture, farming, education, and war, check out Victor Davis Hanson. *An Autumn of War* is not to be missed.

Chapter 67

"I can't believe you did that!"

Zuko stared down at the disbelieving airbender in his wheelchair, then lifted his gaze to Changchang and the rest of the Air Temple elders gathered in the windy courtyard. They were silent, apparently willing to let Teo do the talking. Or in this case, the yelling.

So he can say what they're all thinking, and then they can deny everything and act polite later. Please. Azula did this better when she was seven.

Behind him Zuko caught a glimpse of Lieutenant Teruko subtly shifting her stance, from simple parade rest to something that just hinted of looming.

Great. This is going downhill fast. I should have sent Uncle.

But Uncle Iroh had thrown himself into getting their domain set for Fong's arrival, and the Dragon of the West had far more experience than anyone organizing defenses against earthbenders. Not to mention the troubling fact that he didn't seem to want Master Amaya too far out of sight. It was *weird*.

Then again, if Fong somehow did manage to get hold of her and her engagement necklace - well. It wouldn't be good.

I should have brought Langxue and Saoluan.

From the perspective of Dragons' Wings - yes, he should have. But the yāorén were supposed to be mediators between humans and spirits. Guardians against spiritual malevolence. Dragging them into an argument between Dragons' Wings and the Northern Temple... no. Bad idea. The Great Spirits wanted airbending back in the world. Zuko had a sick feeling that threatening to interfere with that would land his little domain in even hotter water.

So what about what Fong's doing, oh supposedly wise spirits? Why does she get a pass?

Then again, given some of those same spirits had apparently turned themselves into *fish*, Zuko suspected spiritual wisdom wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

Seriously. Koi fish. What did you think you'd do, barbel a bad guy to death?

"We were helping you, we were spying on them for you, and you just *killed* them-" Teo cut himself off. "You're not even listening to me!"

"Lieutenant?" Zuko said neutrally. "Did he say anything he didn't say the first ten times?"

Teruko's face was suspiciously blank. "No, sir."

"Right." And Zuko was not going to think about the very long drop past the courtyard edge, and how easy it would be for an angry airbender to blast him over it. "Teo. I'm trying to understand what the problem is. I really am. But the last time I checked, your people here needed our help to trade with someone for grain, among other things. You can trade with us, or with your relatives in the valley farms; either way, you still need our help to make sure food gets up here. And if Fong gets to Dragons' Wings-"

"After you killed his people!" Teo cut across his words. "You - you didn't even warn them, you just crushed them in the mud-"

"He's coming *to kill us*."

...Huh. Maybe watching Teruko's example of command voice was paying off. Teo looked like he'd been slapped with an octopus.

"I've sent him messages," Zuko went on, eyes narrowed. "I've asked him to stop. I've asked him to negotiate. We dumped scorpion-bees in his camp; *tell* me that's not a big enough clue that we don't want him here. And he. Isn't. Stopping." *Quick breath. Don't let him regroup.* "A general brings his army into foreign territory full of *civilians* for only one reason. Let me clue you in: it's not to have a picnic."

Zuko gestured toward the clouds below, thick enough to block any view of the sea. "My people are down there. They can't fly away. There's nowhere for us to go. And if Fong gets earthbenders into range of our terraces, we are going to starve." Not as fast as the Air Temple; seaweed and fish could go a long way. But it wasn't the best diet to keep fighting strength on, and that really would get them killed.

Teo was shaking his head. "Earthbenders don't tear up farms-"

"To kill the Fire Nation? Believe me. They do," Zuko bit out. "You know how much room you need for a takeoff. Would you just think about the possibility that maybe, just *maybe*, we know how much room we need to stop an army?"

"Don't say stop." Teo gripped a wheel, not backing down. "Don't you dare say *stop*. You're going to kill them."

"If I have to," Zuko stated, voice flat. "Yes. I will kill them, if they keep coming. But they don't have to keep coming. All they have to do is turn around, and *leave*." *Keep calm. Maybe he missed the obvious.* "Anybody in Fong's army who can read knows they've got no right to be here." He looked at the crowd of so-called adults watching them. "You didn't have a problem with warning people when you threw War Minister Qin off the mountain."

"That was different!" Teo protested.

Got you. "Why?" Zuko pounced. Because if the answer was *because they're Fire Nation* or even *because this is our land*-

"The Avatar was with us!"

For a long moment, all Zuko could hear was the mountain wind.

"...I give up." He nodded at the lieutenant. "Let's go."

"Sir?" Teruko asked, startled.

"You can't argue with someone who just *believes*," Zuko said flatly. "We're wasting time. Let's go."

Changchang finally moved, hands on her hips. "Now, young man, don't be hasty. Fong aside, those are good Earth Kingdom men. You can't expect us to-"

"*Yes, I can!*"

Zuko let a steaming breath escape, fixing them all in his glare. "That's how you decide when it's right to fight for your lives? When the *Avatar* says so? What is wrong with you? Where's your honor? Where are your guts? Where is our *deal*?"

"We can't kill innocent people!" Teo shot back. "That would betray everything my father wanted." He shook his head, not backing down. "And we can't help you kill them."

Zuko didn't twitch. "We're going to remember that."

Teo flinched. "First you say we're friends. Now you're *threatening*-"

"Neighbors," Zuko clipped out. "I said we were *neighbors*. That has nothing to do with being friends. And it's no threat. It's a promise. We have long memories, Teo. Longer than you've ever imagined. We're your neighbors, and we helped you when you needed it. Now we're asking for your help. And you're not just saying no. You're saying we're evil just for asking."

"We did not!"

"They're coming to kill my people, and you call *them* innocent," Zuko said dryly. "What is killing innocent people supposed to be? An accident?" He shrugged. "Give my regards to your relatives. You're going to want to remember the look on their faces, when they realize you're abandoning them."

That drew an angry murmur from the crowd, and more than a few clenched fists.

Good. Maybe there's fight in them after all. "That's what you're doing," Zuko went on. "We've taken some of the pressure out of Asagitatsus. But if we can't keep it up - and we will have a very hard time doing that if we're dead - then she'll still erupt. It might take a decade. It might take ten. But she will go up." He swept a hand across, dismissing them all with a flick of his wrist. "But maybe you don't care what happens a few years from now. Not when fixing it would mean fighting without the Avatar's permission."

Teo winced at that. But he rolled forward, eyes grave. "You're right. We don't know what will happen in a few years. All we know is what we're going to do about what's happening here, now. Whatever General Fong decides to do, these are good people. *Our* people. How can we fight them, when they're trying to do what's right?" He looked at Changchang. "Asagitatsus scares me. She scares anybody who thinks about it." He glared at Zuko. "But Aang's beaten volcanoes before."

"...Utterly. Wrong. Kind of volcano," Zuko managed. *Agni? If this is a nightmare, I'd like to wake up now.*

No such luck. Figured.

"Avatar Roku died fighting a volcano," Zuko stated, sweeping the crowd with his gaze. "And he was a fully trained Avatar, who could bend lava." *Facts. Arguing won't work. Give them facts, and let them choke on it.* "The Face-Stealer's plan was to have this volcano kill Aang. We've bought some time. It won't last forever." He looked Teo in the eye. "If the harbor fires go out, we've lost. Don't land. The drowned will be there."

Teo swallowed. He might not believe in walking corpses, but all the gliders had to admit they'd seen *something*. "Aang can-"

"Avatar Aang *created* the drowned," Teruko bit out. "I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for him to get rid of them."

"Lieutenant," Zuko warned. *Civil. We are going to be civil. Especially if we want to burn the place down.* "She's right, though. It's the Face-Stealer's power that makes the drowned walk. But if Aang and the Ocean hadn't drowned an entire fleet - with a *spirit's* wave, not waterbending, the moon was out! - the Face Stealer wouldn't have gotten to trap their spirits in the first place." He let his voice drop. "If I were you, Teo, I'd get all the supplies up here I could. Because if we lose..." He shrugged. "The drowned are already dead. What are you going to do? Kill them again?"

Only then did he turn and head for the elevator, ignoring the angry voices raised behind them. Let them yell. And demand. And cry for things to be fair.

I've had enough.

"You mean they're not going to help at all?" Jinhai held three smoking leaves, all of which threatened to flare in his hands. "That's not right!"

Going over her new knives for any hint of rust, Suyin listened intently from her corner of the family garden. Lim and Daiyu were wonderful little girls, but honestly, they were driving her *nuts*. At least if she was watching Jinhai she could get a little peace and quiet.

"It's not that simple." Zuko held his own trio of charred leaves, wisps of smoke curling into the wind. "General Fong's soldiers are Earth Kingdom. The Mechanist's people don't want to hurt men who might be family. Men who haven't done anything to them, yet. They feel... well. Like you'd feel, if someone told your family the City Guard was going to try and hurt you."

Jinhai's leaves flickered. One went out.

"No one here would do that," Zuko said firmly. "But Fong's people aren't from here. I don't think Teo understands how much of a difference that makes. This is not a friendly visit. It's not a misguided march. Even if Dragons' Wings wasn't here, Fong still would be. And he'd still besiege the Temple. He'd just be a little more polite about it."

"The Temple?" Suyin exclaimed, startled out of her intention to stay quiet. "He's coming after us!"

"Because we're here. Look." Zuko smoothed the top of the sand bucket standing by for emergencies, and sketched a swift triangle, sloping down on the left to the bay of Dragons' Wings. "The farms are over here." Zuko tapped the right base of the peak. "The Temple's up here," a tap near the top, "and this is us." The bay. "Fong's coming across here." He dragged a finger in the sand, bisecting the triangle two-thirds down. "We bounced him off the route he wanted to take," the finger went back on the line, dragged another trail down and across, "but that only worked as well as it did because he really wanted to go that way to start with. We just gave him an excuse."

Suyin blinked, trying to sort that out. From her brother's frown, Jinhai was completely lost. "Are you saying he *wanted* to take an army of earthbenders through farm fields? That's - that's-" She shook her head, unable to find words to describe how horribly wrong that was. Her father did archaeology in fields, sure; but only if the crop was already in, and only after bending a test plot to check what kind of soil he was dealing with. Plant roots were alive, too; they needed air. Squishing soil together suffocated them. Tingzhe Wen drummed it into every student: if you can't put it back the way it was, *don't bend it*.

Zuko was studying them both thoughtfully. "Douse them," he told Jinhai. "We'll start again. I think you need to understand what Fong's doing, first."

"Coming to hurt us." Jinhai shivered a little, and looked up at the Mountain. "And they're not

helping! That's mean."

"It looks mean. But it might be better if they don't help us, not yet," Zuko said frankly. "General Fong is going to try to come after us. We're going to stop him, but that's what he wants to do. The thing is... well, if your mother tells you after supper you can play hide 'n slide, but you have to brush your teeth, which one do you want to do first?"

Jinhai cocked his head like that was the dumbest question ever. "You have to brush your teeth *first*."

"Your mother can be scary," Zuko agreed. "Right. So... this is kind of hard, and messy... General Fong can't just do what he wants to, either. He's got responsibilities to the Earth Kingdom. And the most important one right now is, he has to make sure the Mechanist never works for the Fire Nation again." Zuko frowned. "So he's coming after us because he thinks we're the Fire Nation. That we're controlling the Air Temple. That we'll give the Mechanist's devices to the Earth Kingdom's enemies. We're not, and we won't - but he doesn't believe it."

"That's stupid!" Jinhai declared. "Teo's Dad isn't making weapons for anybody *ever*. Teo says that all the time!"

"And that's why the Mechanist's people are really in trouble." Zuko grimaced. "The first thing Fong has to do is make sure the Fire Nation doesn't get more weapons. The *second* thing he has to do... is make sure the Earth Kingdom *does*."

Suyin felt chill, as if a shadow were already passing over the face of the sun. "Teo won't do that," she got out. "The Temple *won't*."

"No," Zuko agreed, very quiet. "Not if they have a choice. That's why Fong is going to attack us." He winced. "And that's why he's going to take over the farms."

"The farms?" Jinhai echoed, confused. "The farmers didn't do anything!"

"No, they didn't," Zuko agreed. "But Fong wants to control what the Temple does. If they can't trade for food, they're in trouble." He sighed. "You say that them not helping us isn't fair. And it's not. And that does make me mad at them. But more than that... I'm sad. I told them Fong's not their friend. They don't believe me. They're going to find out. And when they do, and know that someone they think is going to save them just wants to use them all over again..." He shook his head. "That's worse than anything I could do to them."

Jinhai hugged his knees to his chest. "Are they going to get hurt?"

"Some of them, probably," Zuko admitted. "We're going to try to do something to stop that. It's going to be dangerous." He growled under his breath. "Which is why I'm stuck here. *Not expendable*. Frost it."

"There is something we can do?" Suyin pounced. "What?"

Zuko gauged the angle of the sun, and smirked. "We start by letting him think he knows more than we do."

"But how do we do..." Suyin's gaze flicked to the bright summer sun. She sucked in a breath. "It's today. The eclipse is *today*."

"For the Fire Nation," Zuko agreed. "For Omashu. Maybe even for places south of Fong's home fort. But not here." His smirk deepened. "But Fong doesn't know that. Especially since Sergeant

Kyo's squad volunteered to... heh. We'll have to see how that works."

Not sure I want to know, Suyin decided. The last time her distant cousin had smirked like that, she'd heard horror stories of scorpion-bees and suffocating mud. "If it's the eclipse..." She swallowed. "Do you think Teo's dad will be okay?" *Do you think the Avatar will win?*

"I hope so." Zuko looked away, hair falling over his scar. "I want the war to be over. I tried to get them some help. I *hope* Sokka's as smart as he thinks he is." He glanced at the sky again. "But one way or another... we won't know until it's too late."

Everything is going wrong today.

Sokka sidestepped the spearhead, using the momentum to bring his sword down through the shaft. The Fire Nation Guard was well-trained, he barely wavered as losing the weight of his spear threw him off stance-

Barely. But it was enough for Sokka to grab armor and shove, hurling the man into what was left of his own spear.

"Our fight is not with the Caldera! We challenge your lord to a meeting with Agni!"

...Which wasn't exactly what Aang was planning, and if Dad or Bato asked what the heck he was yelling in the middle of the battle, things might get complicated. But damn it, these weren't Fire Nation soldiers. Not like the bastards who'd killed Mom, or attacked the Earth Kingdom, or tried to wipe out the Northern Water Tribe. These were the Home Guard; and yes, they *were* the enemy, but they were also doing exactly what he'd done when Zuko crashed into his village. Fighting back, with everything they had, because everything they loved was about to go up in flames.

He had to fight them. Sometimes he had to kill them. But if even one of them listened, and backed off...

Maybe today wouldn't hurt so much.

We have to buy Aang more time.

They didn't have enough blasting jelly to blow the gates, and too many Temul-visions of burning oil poured into tight spaces meant he *really* didn't want Toph tunneling here. So even with Katara shooting ice daggers down from Appa, they were pretty much stuck fighting on the beach and in the harbor. Which wasn't as bad a situation as he'd first thought. Sure, if they'd meant to invade the Caldera, being bottled up like this would be nasty. But as a distraction, this worked. And it kept them close to the three remaining subs. Meaning if things went even more wrong, Ji and the others could get out fast. Hopefully.

And it was just about time, he could hear yelling about putting on your eclipse glasses. Which he would have, really. But he wasn't dumb enough to stare up at the sun, and the last spearman had had lady buddies who might be firebenders, but looked angry enough to go after him bare-handed whether or not they had flames, so he was a little *busy* right now.

Aang? Get Ozai. Stop him.

But... please be okay.

Palaces weren't supposed to be empty.

Not that Aang had been in one besides Earth King Kuei's. Bumi's place was big, but it wasn't exactly a palace. Toph's parents' place had felt fancier, even if Bumi's was a *lot* bigger...

Fire Lord Ozai's palace was big. And fancy. And *empty*, tapestries of the past Fire Lords fluttering in the breeze from his flight. It was weird.

"Fire Lord Ozai!" Aang thumped his new airstaff on the floor in front of the empty throne. "Where are you?"

Nothing but echoes.

They know you're coming, Shidan had said. *They know about the eclipse*.

And okay, that had been scary - but knowing couldn't change what was going to happen. There was going to be an eclipse. There were going to be eight minutes with no firebending. And that meant he and Ozai were going to fight, and the Fire Lord was going to *lose*. Nothing Ozai could do would let him win.

...Except not being there to fight in the first place.

Which was *not fair*. Just not. Fire was supposed to *attack*. All the time. Ozai not even *being* here - that was how *Air* was supposed to fight. Fire couldn't be Air. This was just... all *wrong*...

In the shadows behind the throne, something hissed.

Aang felt his shaved head prickle in goosebumps. That... that almost sounded like something laughing...

Blue shadows uncoiled, arching high. Translucent blue spread and *boomed* against air, like sails catching the wind. Indigo flexed, extending ivory daggers that gripped polished wood, leaving deep dents. Summer-blue scales dipped, azure whiskers reaching out to touch, as lambent gold eyes stared deep into his own.

Hello, dinner...

Chapter 68

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

One good thing about all that yellow and orange, Katara thought, gripping Appa's saddle as she peered across the sky toward a flicker of movement. You can see it. What happened? The eclipse just started. Did he beat the Fire Lord that fast?

It could happen. Most firebenders just didn't do weapons. If Aang had bending and Ozai didn't, their plan could have worked...

In a clear summer sky, it would have been invisible. But the world was in an odd half-twilight, made even darker by her eclipse glasses. And in that dark sky something moved, blue and sinuous as a river of ice, fangs and claws spread to pounce-

Repulse Lemur!

Why Master Pakku called it that when the North Pole didn't have any lemurs, Katara had no idea. But she'd practiced this form until she could do it in her sleep. Raised palms gathered the water from a barrel, the step and turn let her lash out with a razor blade of water that sliced the air between them and would have taken the dragon between the eyes if it hadn't dipped a wing and shrugged a twist lower in the sky, quick as a stooping bat-falcon.

Water sailed past the furled wing, barely clipping a strand of azure mane.

But Aang had gained yards of separation, which was what mattered. He leveled out and soared toward her, evidently bent on landing so he could bring all his bending to bear-

The blue dragon streaked skyward, climbing only to fall in a stoop between them. The wing from its wings stung Katara's eyes with blinding dust; twisted even Aang's airbending awry, so he had to grip his airstaff and arc away to get the wind back under him.

It knows what bending is, Katara thought, ice running down her spine as Aang struggled to swing back toward her and the dragon climbed for the clouds again. It's not letting him land. It's like Shidan. It thinks.

A hiss filled the sky, and blue stooped like a scaled thunderbolt.

The fists Katara brought arcing forward raised a shield of water-turned ice over Appa's back. Ivory talons screeched across the slick surface, cracking off a fall of glittering shards.

Katara flicked her fingers open, collapsing ice into water that a push of her hands sent up as tentacles to yank down-

Wind gusted from a downbeat of wings, tossing the dragon up and away from grasping water.

I wish Toph were here.

Not that the earthbender could do much in midair, except toss a few rocks where her ears told her the dragon might be. But even a pebble might be enough distraction to keep the dragon still long enough to kill it.

The dragons are almost gone. Aang wouldn't want me to hurt it.

Given the green fabric of Aang's glider had just barely missed getting sheared in half by a swipe of that vicious tail, Aang didn't get a say here-

Katara's stomach lurched, hair flying up to blind her as the saddle almost dove out from under her. Appa's legs beat the air, heading for Aang no matter what her hasty grab at the reins said.

Sokka. I wish I had Sokka up here!

She'd swear that dragon was laughing at her. Benders needed free hands, free *something* to move, and between the dragon and Appa the two benders up here might as well have their own eclipse happening.

We made Appa armor to protect him from fireballs. Right now, it's slowing him down.

And the dragon was fast. Fast as Azula.

Fast and *high*, which hurt her brain. Almost all the bending she'd done had been on the ground. Or at least on a boat. You didn't have to worry about things coming at you from beyond the height of the tallest tree. Especially not clawed, fanged, hungry things. Like the one arcing down toward Aang.

Mistake, Katara thought grimly, gathering up her water into a bundle of razor spikes as Appa leveled out. *Left your belly open*. She stepped back, and whipped forward.

Blue scales coiled in a spiral, the few shards that struck true shattering.

Katara seized more water from her barrels with a sweep of one hand, the other trying to pull Appa's reins up and away from where Aang was twisting himself through air to slip past reaching claws. "Appa, listen! We have to lead it away. If Aang can land, he can bend and help us!"

Appa tossed his head, horns almost tearing the reins from her grip. She winced, but held on, ready to throw more ice. The dragon's luck couldn't hold forever.

It doesn't have to, she realized, chilled by another gust of wind as Aang zipped and swirled through air, trying to get past the dragon to them. *The eclipse will be over in minutes. Then every firebender will have fire again. Even dragons. All it has to do is dodge, and let you throw away your water...*

The eclipse is a trap.

She couldn't wrap her mind around it, even as Appa's panicked flight took them away from the greenery and palaces, back over the Caldera wall toward the sea. *How can it be a trap? You can't pretend to be weak in front of your enemies! Warriors won't do that. They'd look like cowards, their villages would drive them out-*

But the Fire Nation were cowards, weren't they? She'd known that from the day her mother had died. They never fought one on one like the tribe's warriors. Always in groups banded together, throwing fire at everything in sight. So if they were already cowards, and the whole nation knew it...

They don't care how they win. Just as long as we lose.

Like Azula. Like a leopard-shark. Like the dragon, snapping at Appa and then Aang like a heron would a school of baitfish, knowing the instinct to school together would keep meals in reach.

It planned this. It's kept him in the air, running, since the sun went dark! Aang can't land if it's going to be right on top of him, and Appa won't fly away from Aang. That thing's not scared, even of the Avatar! It has us right where it wants us. All it has to do is keep us split up, and wait-

Eight minutes. The Mechanist said the eclipse was only *eight minutes*.

It wouldn't have to wait much longer.

Her world pitched sideways, water soaking her in a blinding splash as Katara dropped to her knees to try and hold on...

No.

She could win this. She *could*. Despite the dragon's plans. *Because* of the dragon's plans. But only if...

Too terrified to shake, she let Appa's roll pitch her out into sea air.

"Katara!"

She breathed in even as wind tore the air away, spreading her arms as she fell toward the harbor. The Fire Nation were cowards. Dragons were predators. Neither could resist helpless prey.

Blue streaked toward her, ivory fangs glinting brighter than the hidden sun.

Wait. Wait...

Gold eyes fixed on hers, hungry and hating.

Now!

Feet brought together to pull her chi and the ocean up, palms lowered and circled to mold one towering, smashing curl of a wave-

The bay crashed down on blue scales, crushing her foe beneath an angry sea.

So close, those waves. *This is going to hurt...*

A gale caught her like a punch to the gut, tossing her up and away from the water. Shadows swooped low-

Katara crashed against Appa's armor hard enough to bruise, left wrist gripped by Aang's determined hand. "Hi," she wheezed.

"Don't do that!" Aang helped her scramble back into the saddle, pale as she'd ever seen him. "I thought she killed you. I thought I wasn't going to get there in time-"

"She?" Katara interrupted. It was nice to know Aang worried about her, it really was, but the eclipse was almost over. "Aang, what happened with the Fire Lord?"

"I don't know! He wasn't there! Makoto was!"

What?

Makoto? Sozin's dragon? Why would she protect the Fire Lords who'd wiped out her people?

Even if she had - it made no *sense*. Fire Nation nobles were all about honor; they'd heard Zuko go on about it often enough. How could it be honorable to hide from the Avatar?

If the Fire Lord's willing to hide... Swallowing hard, Katara reached for the waves below. The dragon had hit like a thunderbolt, but she had to be sure.

The water was empty, except for laughter.

There was an ant gnawing on Rikiya's ankle, and he was not happy about it.

Shoo. He wrinkled his nose; bad enough they'd had to crawl through a field of barleycorn, he just knew he'd be itching for weeks. Now they had to deal with man-eating bugs, too? *Go away. Move it, bozo, before I squish you.*

An empty threat at the moment, and the wily little chomper knew it. Even an ant could feel the focused will that was Sergeant Kyo glaring at his men to *not move*, damn it.

A hopeless order, when it came to Fushi. Which was why she and Moriaki were back at the rendezvous to cover their retreat-

Rikiya gripped his lip with his teeth, forcing himself not to swear. Oh. Joy. The ant had brought *friends*.

Look at it this way, the firebender told himself, as he had for over a decade. *Which would you rather deal with? Ants, or court?*

Heh. No contest. Ants didn't slander your reputation, arrange for you to get caught chatting up the wrong noble's daughters, or slip poison into your tea. Life as a marine was *much* safer.

Most of the time. Sneaking close enough to General Fong's army to hear him pontificate on the eclipse as a gift of the spirits to the world and the Earth Kingdom in specific wasn't exactly safe.

Nice podium he's bent out of the ground there. I wonder if Sarge can get close enough to set it on fire?

He wouldn't be surprised if Sergeant Kyo could. But the Sarge probably wouldn't go that far. Setting surface fires that burned grass and brush was one thing. Even a crown fire, taking down whole forests, didn't doom a land to destruction. Ground fire, that burned out roots and the health of the soil itself? Bad. Very bad.

Besides. Getting that close wasn't in the plan.

Lucky for us Fong's a fortress commander. He just doesn't get entrenching every time you stop.

And Fong *really* didn't get fireworks.

Okay. Given there's no noisy avalanches landing on your head, pretty sure they haven't seen any of us. Pick your angle, stick the mount wires in the ground, unspool the fuse...

The tricky thing to figure out hadn't been planning how to pull off what the general and the prince wanted to go boom. The real trick had been figuring out how his squad could pull it off and live.

"Come back alive," their prince had ordered. *"If it comes to a siege, we're going to need all of you. So either you come back, or I'm going to have very pointed discussions with your ghosts."*

Which would have been a scary enough threat from an ordinary great name. From a dragon-child who'd already kicked serious spirit butt? Even Sergeant Kyo looked impressed.

Just about out of fuse, Rikiya reflected, a tense quarter-hour later. Sneaking back through the grainfield wasn't fun, but it was doable, especially with the odd passing breezes waving still-green barleycorn.

Good thing it's still green. We won't start a fire. Probably. Rikiya gauged the angle of the sun again, and listened. *Noon. That's when Fong thinks the eclipse is happening. Should be right about...*

What sounded like a jacana warbler chattered, three times.

Rikiya huffed a breath, fire blooming from his knuckles to race hissing down the fuse. *Time to go.*

He kept his head down below nodding heads of grain, but otherwise wasted no time running. Fong was going to have more than enough on his plate any minute now-

Rockets screamed.

A rattle like clashing feathers wrapped around Toph's knees, tugging her away from the harbor.

"Boots." She dropped one hand long enough to pet something that wasn't exactly there; turned it into a scooping motion that crumbled a chunk of rock and sent the resulting sand flying into Guards' faces to blind them. "Where've you been? We could have used you freaking out some of Azula's buddies."

The shuddering stomp near her toes was ample evidence Boots considered getting near Azula one of the stupidest things any human or spirit could do. Again, the spirit tugged.

"Something in the water?" Toph felt at the black hole where the beach ran under the waves. One of the good things about the bad guys throwing fire around was ashes. She could feel them dancing through the air like dust in the wind, settling over everything in hearing range. Even on something that rocked and swayed, like the Mechanist's metal fish had under the sea.

The water. Got to be. I don't see anything... but that doesn't mean nothing's there.

Especially after that tremendous splash. She'd never expected to hear that, not after people had started screaming about a *blue dragon* attacking Aang.

One of these days, I have to ask Luli if you can feel blue.

But now she could hear Appa bellowing, the determined kind of bellow, and people cheering the Avatar; yelling that the eclipse was over, and the Fire Lord must be defeated. So things had to be okay up there. Right?

Down here by the water... maybe not. "Another tentacle-thing?"

Boots made a shuffling sound, like sandals scuffing grass.

Probably not, then, Toph judged. Boots wanted her away from the water, but wasn't nearly as frantic as when something had been trying to *eat* her.

Time to find somebody with working eyes. Feels like Sokka's headed this way, and that's Chief Hakoda over there-

Toph dug her toes into the sand as the wind from Appa tumbled surviving Home Guards off their feet. A push of her hands rippled the sand under them like a wave, surging up to lock them in to their shoulders. *That should hold 'em.*

And if everybody was lucky, they'd stay held. Brawl, sure; she could do that all day. But she hated blood. She hated dying. No matter whose side it was on.

"Avatar Aang!" Chief Hakoda; and he wasn't cheering, no matter what the rest of their allies sounded like. "What happened? Where's the Fire Lord?"

"I don't *know!*"

Already heading that way, Toph had to pick up her jaw before she tripped over it. The last time she'd heard that much frustration and confusion in Aang's voice, the Painted Lady had just tsunami'd a bunch of soldiers-

"*Look!*"

At least she was close enough. Toph grabbed Sokka's sleeve, feeling the terror trembling through everyone's feet. "Want to tell me what I'm *looking* at?"

From his shaky breath, Sokka wanted to run himself. "If Momo was one of the Mechanist's war balloons? These would be Appas."

Huge massive war-balloony things up in the air, where she couldn't target them without help? Not fair.

"Where did they... *how* did they?" Katara stammered. "The Mechanist is with us!"

"Doesn't matter, if they got one of his blueprints," Sokka said grimly. "It's not like picking the right tree out of a forest for a ship, Sis. It's steel and cloth and following a plan. The Fire Nation's good at plans. They *build ships*. It's what they *do*."

Toph cocked an ear to the wind. There were distant roars of fire which had to be heating the war balloons, a growing clamor as their friends realized the Fire Nation had come up with some new trick, an odd faint whistling...

Whistling?

Katara was shaking her head. "The Mechanist never showed us anything like those-"

"*Get down!*"

Toph wasn't sure if it was Sokka or Hakoda who'd yelled it. All she knew was that suddenly the world came apart, in *loud* and *hot* and screaming.

The perishable things of this world might be illusions, Hue reflected, but the Fire Lord's giant flying sausage-ships were one darn convincing illusion.

"Get us below the surface!" Chief Hakoda called to the waterbenders swooping water past their metal fish to pull them down. "They can't hit us if they can't see us-"

The metal cavern rocked again, water slapping against steel and bending as more explosions tore apart the surface. Most of Hue's friends and allies were probably wondering if it was safer down here, or if they should have taken their chances in the clear air of the beach.

Safety is just as much an illusion as death.

From the purely spiritual perspective of putting the world back in balance, though, it was better for them under the surface. Avatar Aang needed more than bending to defeat the Fire Lord and end the war. He needed faith in himself. And Avatar or not, no very young man was going to pull that off if he thought he'd gotten his friends and family killed.

Too many spirits have fled this illusion already, Hue sighed.

Being spiritual didn't mean he didn't mourn. Flesh was fragile, yes, only spirit endured - but that flesh was how spirits touched each other in this life. When it died, all a spirit's chance to touch those still embodied died with it. Death was a shutting of doors, a crushing loss of opportunities for all those left behind.

And Aang's already lost enough. Poor youngster.

Hue hoped the boy's friends were well. That they were telling him there would be other chances; other paths to take. Because there were-

Something moved through the water, and a chill sluiced down Hue's spine. *What is that?*

Shaken earthbenders and Southern tribesmen gathered near glass portholes, trying to peer through the dim waters as the Swampers kept them swimming away from the Fire Nation. Whispered guesses ran from *really big fish* to *trick of the light*, to...

"There was a dragon fighting the Avatar."

Whatever it was, was long and sinuous and never quite close enough to make out. And stayed that way, effortlessly, even as the air grew hot and stale from so many benders working so long.

"It's pacing us," Chief Hakoda muttered. "What is it?"

"Whatever it may be, we need to surface." Still near the exit ladder, Ji the Mechanist wiped sweat from his bare brow, mustache already dripping. "I hadn't considered the full implications of bending on our air supply. We can't stay down too much longer."

"I'd like nothing better," Hakoda said grimly. "But where? We have wounded. We need to get to land, not just air. And our rendezvous point is blown. The Fire Nation will be watching."

Hue smiled. "The universe might be illusions, but some of those illusions can be trusted." He never missed a stroke, as the chief's eyes snapped to him. "They're not watching everywhere."

"If you have an idea, shaman," Hakoda suggested, "I'm sure we'll all be glad to hear it."

"I'm no shaman. Just a man who listens to the web of life." Hue moved through three more strokes, reflecting on kindness, and secrets. "Trust the currents. They'll take you where you need to be."

Though as a young Avatar had discovered, where you needed to be wasn't always where you *wanted* to be.

And that sinuous shadow still swam at the edge of vision, chilling Hue's spirit.

Old hate. Old evil. Hue drew a stale breath. *But better chasing us, than the Avatar.*

Katara lashed out with another razor-edged whip of water, opening a long rent in red fabric. The

giant war balloon listed to the side, spilling hot air, screams, and what looked like glass jars of blasting jelly. "Sokka, we can't just leave!"

"There's too many, Sis. Everybody who's going to get out, is out."

Sokka winced as Aang shot him a look, reins wrapped around the airbender's pale hands. "Are you sure?"

"I wish I wasn't," Sokka said honestly. Which was almost true. The only thing he would have hated more than knowing how badly they'd been screwed, was *not* knowing. At least this way he could make sure some of them got out. "Everybody who could got to the subs. We have to *go*."

"...Right." Aang faced forward, toward the sea. "Yip yip, buddy."

"They're flying," the Duke muttered. He and Haru were clinging together, Momo curled on top of them like a clingy scarf. "How can the Fire Nation be flying?"

"Dragons fly." Toph was gripping the saddle rim so hard her knuckles were white. "What do we do now?"

"What can we do?" Aang's voice was as lost as Sokka had ever heard it. Even losing Appa hadn't been that bleak. "We lost. It's over."

He held it together this long, Sokka reminded himself. I wasn't sure I could keep it together this long. "It's not over," Sokka said bluntly. "We're not dead. You're not dead. We'll get another chance. Today just wasn't our day." *Understatement*, he thought, keeping an eye on the massive craft falling behind them. *Good, they're not as fast as Appa. We can make it.*

Then again, war balloons were machines. Azula had already proved her tank could outlast Appa in the long run. Sooner or later, the sky bison had to sleep.

But this time, Appa's not shedding. If we get out of sight, they won't be able to track us.

Which was not the same as saying the Fire Nation wouldn't know where to look for them. If Azula, Zuko, or Zhao had reported anything about their Avatar-hunts, the Fire Nation had a fair estimate of how far and fast Appa could fly. They'd know what radius they had to search.

And there's only so many islands out there. Still, they have to get messages to the local Home Guards. That takes time, even with messenger hawks. We can stay ahead of them. If we're careful. At least long enough to figure out what to do next.

Which would be a good thing, because right now he had no clue. The eclipse was supposed to *work*. Trap or no trap.

I was wondering what they'd do about that, Sokka thought sourly. *No firebending for eight minutes. Aang can bend three other elements. Winner? The Avatar. End of discussion.*

Or it would have been. If Ozai had actually shown up to the fight.

How do you win a fight you can't win? Sokka rolled his eyes at the sky. *Easy. Don't let there be a fight in the first place.*

So simple. He could have kicked himself. What had Master Piandao taught him? *The best block, is not to be there.*

Negative jin. Avoid the attack. Only Aang had been taught about jin for bending, not combat. Firebending was supposed to be positive jin. Attacking. Aang probably hadn't even considered that Ozai would want to avoid a fight.

But I should have, Sokka growled at himself. *People aren't their bending. I know that. Toph attacks things all the time. Azula and Iroh dodge. Heck, if I'd thought we were heading after Azula...*

Well. They'd already seen Azula pick her best option. Attack their people, attack Aang - but *not* during the eclipse.

Azula knows what Kyoshi did. She probably found a hole and pulled it in after her until it was over. She's smart.

Why didn't we think Ozai could be smart?

"My father..." Haru's wince was audible. "What do we do now, Avatar Aang?"

"Why does everybody keep asking *me*?"

"Because we believe in you," Katara started.

"That's not true. You believe in the Avatar, not me!"

Sokka counted to ten. Twice. He was not going to dunk Aang's head in icy water until the kid saw sense. Not now. "Aang? You're going to say you're sorry. And you're going to mean it. Later. Right now, this was *our* plan. *We* screwed up. So now we need to find a way out of it. Any suggestions? I'm thinking we need to get out of sight first, think up a better plan later." He heaved a deep sigh. "And Aang? I believe in you. If Ozai had been there, you would have kicked his *butt*." He shrugged, and glanced back. "So where can we go while we figure out how we're going to try again?"

Aang swallowed. Looked away, shivering a little. Stared at the ocean below. "I'm... thinking."

Toph freed up one hand enough to wave. "Not real good with maps, but isn't Byakko around here somewhere?"

"Byakko?" the Duke asked.

"Island domain," Sokka filled him in. Huh. It was, actually-

Damn. *Now* he remembered the map. "They're way west of the Caldera," Sokka told Toph. "We could get there, but we'd have to circle the whole big island. And Appa's kind of obvious..." He trailed off, watching his sister get paler and paler. "Katara?"

She picked at her waterskin. "...They won't be able to help us."

"Huh? Why not?" Toph slid her hand back along the edge, trying to get in range to give Katara her best listen. "Maybe Grandpa doesn't like you guys a lot, but he's not gonna throw us to Ozai..." Her words died off at Katara's silence. "What did you do?"

"What makes you think Katara did anything?" Aang said defensively.

"Because she's not talking about it," Toph shot back. "What happened?"

Katara looked away. "Those people who came with Azula, the chi-blockers... they know he's a traitor now."

Sokka slapped himself in the forehead. *Zuko is going to kill us.*

Assuming Shidan didn't get to do it first.

"You..." Toph paled. "Why?"

"He's *Azula's* grandfather, too! I thought - well, how else did they find us?"

"The same way they caught us at the Caldera," Sokka said grimly. "They knew we were coming. All they had to do was look. We were moving an army, Katara. There aren't that many places you can hide a bunch of ships!" *Damn it. It's the Wens all over again. Subtle. Why can't we ever do subtle?*

"Wait, wait - Azula's grandfather?" Haru put in, wide-eyed. "You called one of the Fire Princess' family *Grandpa?*"

"Azula's nuts. Shidan's *not*," Toph snapped at him. "He's a good guy. And he *tried to help us*. And now, Ozai's gonna..." She curled up on herself, biting her lip.

"Ozai's going to be busy looking for us," Sokka said firmly. "He's got to find us, and I kind of doubt they built those balloons just for us, so... he's planning to do something nasty to the Earth Kingdom. That doesn't leave him too much of the Army and Navy to spread around. Yeah, that's still more people than Shidan's got, but Byakko's on the Western Ocean. Let me tell you about the Western Ocean. Outside of crazy traders and ice-mountain tourists, *nobody* wants to go there. The water goes straight down for miles, and there are *things* out there. Big, nobody-quite-sees-'em, man-eating *things*. And even if you get past those, Byakko's a tough nut to crack." Exposed to storms off the Western Ocean, very few good harbors deep enough to shelter Navy ships, every landing site known and generally watched... and that didn't even begin to cover the fact that Byakko trained a fair amount of firebenders, Yu Yan, and just general cut-you-up badasses. Add in Mount Shirotona and the yamabushi - yeah. Ozai wasn't wiping them out in a day. "He'll be okay, Toph. For a while."

But he's not going to be helping us, either. Damn.

"I've never even heard of the Western Ocean," Haru said thoughtfully. "I saw it on your map, but... how do you know what's out there?"

"Somebody we met had a library," Sokka quipped. Which was perfectly true. He hadn't learned about Byakko from Master Piandao's library, but he knew the information was there.

Used to be Temul's library, after all.

One of these days, he wasn't going to be able to use that excuse.

But not today. I'll come clean, I swear - but not now. Everybody's upset enough already.

Aang took a deep breath, and nodded. "I know where we can go."

"Remember, waterbenders are skilled in emotional manipulation and psychological warfare," Azula directed her onmitsu as her ship headed for the smoke rising over the Caldera's main harbor. "Anything they might say will be calculated to cause dissent and damage to morale. They know they can't face us in open battle. But they think they don't have to. That if they buy enough time for the Avatar to master firebending and attack the Fire Lord once more, they'll win. But they *will not* have that time."

Aang knows what I did to him. And everyone always blames Zuzu when my plans unfold. This time, they're even right. The Avatar won't go near my brother's band of renegades.

As for Jeong Jeong - she already had cabbage merchants looking for him.

"They can't win that way," Azula stated, eyes flicking over Anshin, Kotori, all the rest of the shadows on *Kartati's* deck. "But they can do a great deal of damage to some of our more... traditional domains. Especially those my house has decreed are necessary, to serve as anchors against the winds of fate. Too much change, too fast, can be as deadly as too little. New weapons, new devices, may make war easier. But the only way to make war *decisive* is to never forget the core of who we *are*."

Fire Nation, Dai Li, and onmitsu. I won you because those who claimed to lead you forgot that loyalty is not water, to meekly flow forever. It is fire. It must be taken, and then you must lead!

And if you're afraid to be burned... you never should have played the game.

"In particular," Azula went on, "our sources say Shidan of Byakko executed a murderous waterbender who'd been hiding under our noses for decades. Not the act of a man who would betray our people to the Avatar. No matter what lies that puffed-up brat of a Southern waterbender might spout."

Anshin inclined his head; the slightest of nods, from the tall, quiet onmitsu leader. Kotori...

Her nod looked the same. But it felt different.

Anshin believes in me. She doesn't. Kuzon was the Great Betrayer - and Shidan is tarred with that brush as well.

Annoying, but hopefully temporary. She knew how Air worked now; Ty Lee's near-fatal brush with her own teachings was proof of that. Air didn't follow lords. It followed a Way, and was bound to those who taught it. Which explained a great deal about Aang that otherwise made no sense whatsoever.

She almost felt sorry for her brother. Zuko had been hunting an airbender based on the idea that the Avatar was at least as sane as anyone else in this war-torn world, and would take steps accordingly. Such as realizing that most of the Fire Nation wanted him captured or dead, and actually trying to, oh, say, not draw attention to himself until he had more training under his belt?

But no. Aang had been following the Way of his teacher, and apparently whoever that monk had been had never passed up a chance for a prank, an adventure, or an opportunity to reason with people.

...Well, sort of reason, anyway. She'd read reports of the low-scale civil war that had broken out between the allied Zhang and Gan Jin, and the inhabitants of a hapless village called Liuqiu whose written records alleged that Wei Jin *had* stolen the so-called sacred orb, but only after Jin Wei had ridden him down in the street.

The reports claimed the two refugee tribes were unshakable allies, joined by their faith in the Avatar. But the nearby Fire Army garrison commander had seen the potential in the ongoing battle, and won a fair swath of mostly-pacified territory by stepping in on the side of the Liuqiu. Who knew how long it'd last, but so long as such petty insults of history divided the Earth Kingdom, the Fire Nation *would* win in the end.

As I'll win Kotori. I will show her a Way - my Way - that will lead us all to glorious victory...

Why are we slowing down?

And why were the dirigibles still hovering about the harbor, in plain view, rather than returning to the airfield for maintenance after their first battle? "Spyglass," Azula demanded from one of the nearby crew. "What's going on over there..."

Not just hovering dirigibles. Something was affecting the way smoke blew over the wrecked harbor. But not from the beach, where any of the Avatar's allies might have lingered. From the city.

I'm going to need more knives.

Mai loosed a swirl of deadly steel as she ran. Four Home Guard firebenders between her and the new landing field, her blades pinned three of them-

Ty Lee landed on the fourth's shoulders in a perfect acrobat's vault, bending to give the poor young soldier an upside-down grin before she jabbed knuckles into the sides of his neck.

He crumpled, Ty Lee already a fluttery handspring away.

This is such a bad plan. We're not firebenders!

Mai dashed forward and leaped into the war balloon's basket anyway, half-gloved hands turning up the furnace flame to roast the air already in the silken shroud. The only reason this stood a chance of working was *because* it was a bad plan. Ozai had already covered all the exits for a good one.

This is going to break Azula.

On the one hand, she couldn't help but smirk in triumph, even with the palace guards hot on their heels. This was exactly what she'd hoped for when Shidan had suggested she rejoin the Fire Princess in the first place. A chance for not just revenge, but true vengeance; to show Azula what it meant when someone you believed in betrayed you. On the other...

This is going to break her. Just when she was figuring out how to care about our people.

"If you seek vengeance, it is your duty to be there to drive the dagger home," Shidan had stated, fire a gold-green blaze about his hands as he mended a lightning-torn heart. "For if you succeed - then, she will truly need you."

It hadn't made sense. Not then.

Ty Lee caught one of the basket ropes, twirled around it, and snatched an anchor line. Momentum landed her in the basket, yanking the last anchor free.

Mai gripped a rope as they bounced upward, trying to slow down frantic gulps of air. It'd been a heck of a run. *Up we go-*

Red fabric fluttered. Billowed, like a luffing sail, as hot air whooshed down and past her face, stealing their lift.

Stunned, Mai followed the breeze to a distant rooftop, where a shadow of gray lurked on the tiles, whirling hands about each other. *Onmitsu. Airbender. Ty Lee's not the only one. How do I knife someone who controls the air?*

"No you don't!"

Ty Lee bounced like a rabbiroo, landing in a bent-kneed stance that wasn't anything Mai had seen her use before. Yet it was familiar.

Katara. That's a waterbending stance!

Ty Lee circled her palms and stepped left in the basket as far as she could, with a toss of her head to bounce hair and chi in a whole-body smile that was pure circus.

Mai caught her balance as their basket skimmed the grassy field, catching on spiderwort leaves before Ty Lee's stolen gale blasted their balloon full and *up*.

Mai threw.

Damn.

Darkened steel caught the onmitsu in the arm, not the neck. That wouldn't slow down a determined bender. And there were more red uniforms tearing their way, lances of fire lashing out toward basket and fragile cloth.

Giggling, Ty Lee swirled around their basket like a fighting flutter-hornet, fluttering and circling and never in the same place if you blinked-

The rim of the basket smacked Mai in the chest, as their craft leapt skyward.

Ow. Ow, ow, kill it lots, ow...

Trying not to rub her abused bosom, Mai held on and gasped for breath. Why was the air so thin, like trying to climb Shirotoro at a dead run-

"Sorry!"

Air flooded back into Mai's lungs like syrup, as their balloon suddenly stopped rising.

"Sorry, I'm sorry; I should know better, you can't make breath come to you!"

Gripping ropes and metal, Mai filled her chest with air. Wonderful air...

She blinked down at a miniature world. Even the lashes of fire reaching for them only looked like flying sparks. "How...?"

"Just a couple thousand feet," Ty Lee said cheerfully. "We should be fine. Even Yu Yan can't shoot this high."

"Not how high," Mai got out. "How-?" She lifted her hand from a woven edge, flicking up.

"Oh!" Ty Lee leaned back against a rope, relieved. "Did you know air weighs a ton?"

Mai stared.

"No really, it does," Ty Lee insisted, gray eyes earnest. "You just don't feel it, because it pushes down all the time. But it's heavy. And hot air makes us lighter. So all I had to do was move the air on top of us, and - vroom!" Her hands sailed upward.

"Oh," Mai deadpanned. "That's all."

"Wasn't it neat? We should do that again!" Ty Lee almost raised her hands. Hesitated. "But you

can't bend, and that means you can't grab air to breathe. That would be bad."

"Just a little," Mai agreed. Took another breath, just to be sure she could. Blinked, and focussed. Red fabric. Steel. Too close.

Why couldn't you have stayed near the harbor with the rest of the dirigibles?

They were smaller than Ozai's fleet. They should be faster; no weight of men or weapons, and not much at all of fuel. And if Ty Lee was right, and air had weight - then the dirigibles had to shove a lot more aside than they did. They should be faster.

But we're not firebenders.

This was going to be interesting.

Dodging bottles of blasting jelly was generally not the sign of a good day.

"Bring them in! Get those fires out!" Azula slapped a bottle from the air with a whip of fire, exploding it harmlessly over the sea below them. "More speed!"

She knew these weapons. She'd helped design these weapons. That was the only thing keeping them alive.

Well, that, the Dai Li's aim with their shrinking pile of rocks, and the fact that the captain was properly terrified enough of her to put the ship into the wind and run for open sea. Dirigibles might not have water currents to fight, but they had to fight air.

"They're falling behind." Anshin crouched beside her, senbons tucked between his fingers. "Kotori's gone."

Azula stiffened. "She's dead? No one said there were casualties-"

"No, Princess. She's *gone*. With at least four of her cohort."

I've been betrayed. For a moment, the world flared red. Then black, full of howling emptiness...

No. Mai is here. Ty Lee is. They came for me. Azula drew herself up straight, pushing aside limp and scorched red fabric. "What happened?"

"Azula! You're all right!" Ty Lee bounced out of the basket, wrapping her in a hug.

Erk. "You're supposed to be in bed," Azula accused her.

"But I'm fine now. Everything's fine." Ty Lee hesitated. "Almost everything."

"We need to get out of sight." Mai stepped onto the deck as if she rode flaming balloons down every day. "The invasion didn't have enough forces to get overconfident. They weren't trapped away from their vessels. Many of them died," Mai met Azula's gaze levelly, "but Chief Hakoda survived."

None of which should have taken more than a messenger hawk dispatched to warn her of her father's displeasure. As she'd expected he would be displeased; Fire Lord Ozai was the only member of the royal line who had never gone to war personally, and this had been meant to be his masterstroke against the Avatar's rebels. But if Mai and Ty Lee had stolen a war balloon, and been pursued with *deadly intent*-

Mai's hands folded in the graceful gestures of a governor's daughter, and her voice took on the formal cadence of High Court. *"He mentioned respect."*

The world seemed to gray.

But... but we couldn't let all those barbarians into the Caldera! There were still civilians in the harbor, they'd never have been able to stay clear of the fighting - it would have been a disaster! We never would have been able to hold occupied territory peacefully after that; all our soldiers would have wanted revenge. I did what I had to for our people...

But it didn't matter. It never mattered.

I ruined Father's plan.

Ty Lee was holding her, warm and alive and whispering *not your fault, you did what was right...*

It doesn't matter.

"Find me the captain." Mai's voice was grim and wavery, as if Azula were hearing her through water. "Get us *out* of here."

Chapter End Notes

It honestly didn't occur to me to mention this until after I'd read some reviews... an eclipse doesn't occur over an entire planet. Not even over most of it. In RL, there's at least a partial solar eclipse for Earth every year; there may be several in any one year. They just aren't over parts of the world where most people reading this can step outside and see it. On top of that, a total solar eclipse actually occurs on a fairly narrow part of the world - a track only about 150 miles wide. Looking at Wikipedia's page on eclipses, and estimating that the Avatar world that we see is only one hemisphere of a planet (given ship travel times in the series, that seems plausible), then the distance between the Fire Nation capital city and Omashu is just about the extent of one total eclipse. Long story short - if the eclipse can even be seen in Ba Sing Se, which is unlikely, it wouldn't be a total eclipse. And it definitely wouldn't get as far north as the Northern Air Temple.

Chapter 69

So the balcony is real.

Lemur shifting on his shoulder, Aang trailed his fingers through white-spotted green leaves, seeing a hundred years of neglect in the way starberry vines swarmed over every stone, shading the whole balcony in green. Shih and Gyate had been whispering to each other there, which would put Temul about here...

Nothing. No spirits, no visions, no angry ghosts threatening to call down lightning. Just stone and green and silence, broken only by badger-frog croaks.

But she was here. Temul was standing right here.

It felt weird to know that. A strange mix of acid in his throat and finally finding a solid place to stand. Temul had been alive when Master Gyatso had still been looking after him. She'd known Air Nomads he might have met. She was wrong about them, utterly wrong-

But she'd known his people. His world. His friend.

Kuzon trusted her. And... Sozin killed her.

It hurt.

But that was kind of what he'd come here for, after he was sure they were safe. His friends could poke around the Western Air Temple, and *ooh* and *ah* while they tried to get over the eclipse. Aang was looking for something else.

He rubbed behind cream-furred ears, thinking hard. "Gyatso said once, if you don't know the face in the mirror, think back to where you were when you did."

Well, here he was. Kind of. At least it was an Air Temple. A hundred years ago.

Back when I was just a kid. Just another Air monk. At least that's what I thought.

"I never wanted to be the Avatar," Aang told empty stones. "I don't want to invade places, or hurt people. Even if I have to, to stop the Fire Lord." He winced, one hand gripping his airstaff hard. "I don't want to. So why am I doing it? There's got to be a better way!"

Silence. The leaves cloaking stone soaked up even the echoes.

Crick. Crick, crick, crick...

Sounded kind of like a cricket-mouse. Momo perked up on his shoulder, dashing off after something in the thicket of vines.

"At least somebody's still got an appetite," Aang muttered. When he thought about what had happened yesterday, all the pain and fighting and dying, and it'd all been for *nothing*-

He didn't even bother brushing leaves off a stone bench. Just flopped down onto it, sick at heart. He couldn't even be glad Sokka had listened to him when he'd said he needed to meditate alone, and kept the rest of his friends away. He just felt...

Awful.

Aang curled his arms around his knees, feeling hot tears splat on the backs of his hands. He was going to meditate. He *was*.

...Later.

I tried. Everybody tried so hard...

He wasn't going to let Katara hear him cry. Not now; maybe not ever.

Someone put an arm around his shoulders.

Aang gulped for breath. "Sokka, just - just let me think..."

"Sokka is quite busy, keeping your little friend the Duke from falling down yet another drop-off," an amused voice said gently. "One wonders when he'll realize every structure in this Temple is meant for those who call the wind for their wings."

Aang froze. He'd heard that voice before.

Except he hadn't. *Temul* had heard that voice before. A hundred years ago.

"I have frightened you." The arm didn't move; warm as sunlight, and not quite solid. "I did not intend to. It has been some time since souls passed within these walls needing comfort." A soft chuckle. "Though not so long as you might think. Many who have fled the Fire Lords' wrath have taken refuge here for a time."

Warily, Aang glanced right and up.

Not very high up, which surprised him. Temul had seemed ten feet tall with the force of her rage, even though that ghost wasn't any taller than Zuko...

Seated, the gold-eyed swordsman wasn't much bigger than Aang.

Dark hair. Only a few wrinkles, like people got from staring into the sun. He looked younger than Chief Hakoda.

Aang swallowed. "You're not..." Words failed him.

"Alive?" Shih grinned at him. "Not quite. Though, neither is one dead. Exactly." He shrugged, like shadows moving through sunlight. "So much grief here, so many seeking refuge from terror and pain... this Temple needed a guardian. And I wished a place of peace and healing. So I stayed." Gold eyes glinted with amusement. "Why are you here?"

A ghost. Was asking him why he was here. A *Fire Nation* ghost. "I'm an Air Nomad!" Aang got out. "Where else would I be?"

"An Air monk." Shih leaned back, chuckling quietly. "A little young for spring festivals, are you not?"

"*Gurk.*" Oh, monkeyfeathers. His face was red, he just knew it.

But if Shih thought he was here to see nuns, then... "Are they alive?" Aang grabbed for a not-quite-there red sleeve. "Please, just tell me somebody's alive, Temul showed us you and Gyate were going to take some girls, but she's a *ghost*, she doesn't breathe, I can't tell if she's lying-"

"Peace. Breathe, young one. Take a moment to think." Laughter fled the spirit's face, leaving

understanding in its wake. "Temul did not lie. Dragon-children rarely do. Gyate and I did rescue many from here, and spirit them away. And yes, some of the children still live. They are older, and cautious of strangers. But they live." Shih looked him over again. "Met Temul, have you? And yet you live. Something must have softened her rage."

Soften it? Aang wondered. *What was she like before?* "Where are they? Why did they go with you? Temul called you the Demon of Taku, but Gyate was trying to *protect* you..."

"Love can lead one to do many things that are not wise," Shih mused. "But Gyate did not protect the Demon." He touched a hand over his heart. "She protected Shih, who had seen too much death, and never wished to deal it again. To be asked to save lives, not take them; how could I abandon innocents to Sozin's evil?"

"But..." Aang swallowed. "You're Fire Nation. Saving people almost killed Kuzon."

"Young Lord Kuzon." Shih inclined his head. "He has always been brave, and faithful beyond death. Firebenders are bound by loyalty. Acting against the Fire Lord's will can be fatal." A flicker of a smile. "But most onmitsu are not bound so tightly. Fortunately." A soft *hah*. "And I had broken from the Fire Lord many years before. It did nearly kill me. But perhaps Agni judged my cause just; or perhaps it was only a favor of a kindly wind. For when the sickness froze my soul, I was cared for by a young maiden who had strayed too far from her cohort." Gold eyes glinted with laughter. "She pinned me between herself and her bison, and demanded I live." A finger tapped the tip of Aang's nose, light as a landing flutter-hornet. "You are very, very stubborn people."

"Gyate." Aang drew back a little, startled and wondering. "It was Gyate, wasn't it. She kept you alive. But... why?" He gulped. "I mean, it was the right thing to do, but-"

"For the Demon of Taku? Ah, I do know what you mean," Shih nodded. "Why did you not leave Prince Zuko to the snows of the North?"

He knows about that? "Because it would have been wrong!"

The spirit inclined his head. "So you believe. But why do you believe so?" He spread empty hands when Aang flinched. "I never said you were wrong, young one. But if you wish to see in a mirror clearly, you must shed light on its reflection."

And that was like what Gyatso had said once. *If you've lost something, don't just look where there is sunlight. Bring light into the dark. Then, you will see.*

But right now, Aang figured, *he* was what was lost.

"It would have been wrong because... because he could have died out there," Aang said haltingly. "And that would have been our fault. Katara already stopped him. He couldn't hurt us anymore. We didn't have to kill him. And if we weren't going to kill him, then... then it would have been wrong to let him get killed. When we knew it could happen, and we weren't going to stop it. We couldn't do that." Aang swallowed, throat dry. "I couldn't do that. Not after Zuko-" He closed his mouth, and shook his head.

"Yes?" Shih arched a dark brow.

"He didn't save them!"

"I never said that he did." Shih tilted his head, curious. "Save who?"

"Sokka and Katara were sick," Aang said reluctantly. "And... Zhao caught me. If Zuko hadn't..."

He hunched his shoulders. It hadn't happened. Zuko had broken him out, and he'd found more frogs, and Sokka and Katara were *fine*.

"It is possible to do the wrong thing for the right reasons," Shih reflected. "Or the right thing, for the wrong ones. Intentions matter. But so do one's actions, and their consequences." He nodded, as if to himself. "Among the Fire Nation it is said, do not drown yourself to save a dying man. But if you know that by failing to act, someone may die... then you must answer to your own conscience for your actions. As Gyate did to hers, warming one who had once been an assassin with her hope."

"I don't want to kill the Fire Lord," Aang got out in a rush. "But I have to stop him. How do I do that?" He smacked himself in the head. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked you that."

Shih blinked at him, head tilted in curiosity.

"The Painted Lady," Aang sighed. "Piandao. Even Shidan. They *can't* help. Sokka explained what Kyoshi did. You can't go against the Fire Lord, or you'll make all the spirits angry."

Silence. Aang looked up-

Into a slow, quiet smile. "That is true for many," Shih allowed. "But I broke from Kyoshi's decree many years ago."

"So did Temul, right?" Aang said, trying to think it through. "Is *that* why there's so many Fire Nation ghosts?" He shivered. "That's *scary*. If the only way you can fight the Fire Lord means you can't get into the spirit world..."

"That is not what keeps Temul here," Shih said firmly. "She is driven by vengeance. I... am bound by quite another purpose." A slight shrug. "Defying the Avatar can make entering the spirit world difficult, but it is not impossible. Death knows no nation." He paused. "Though it is true, some ghosts can make themselves known to men more easily than others. It may come as a surprise to a young man taught to think well of the spirits, but Fire ghosts are... pushy."

Aang couldn't help but snicker.

"Heh. You have noticed, then." Shih laughed himself. "But we have to be. Especially if we wish to speak to *you*. You carry within you the power of the world itself, Aang. If you do not deliberately calm it - for a human spirit, it is as if one cries into a hurricane. Your voice, even the sight of you, are lost in whirling winds."

But the Fire Nation isn't all human. "You mean there could be ghosts all around me, and I wouldn't know?" Aang demanded.

"At one time or another, there are ghosts about all of us," Shih stated. "But no, young man. There are many who still wish you well, even if they can no longer walk among the living." He looked Aang up and down, with the sort of worry and *I'm going to fix this* Aang was used to seeing on Sokka. "Time passes oddly for spirits... you look as though the world has ended. Yet I feel Sozin's Comet has not yet come."

"Doesn't matter when it comes," Aang got out. "We've already lost."

Everything spilled out. The eclipse. The invasion. The throne room, empty except for a raging dragon. The war balloons.

"It's all my fault," Aang said numbly, hugging his knees to his chest. "All those people dying, all the things the Fire Lord's going to do because we couldn't stop him..."

"Ah." There was almost a chuckle in Shih's voice. "So you determined how long the eclipse would be. I am surprised; I knew the Avatar commanded the spirits of this world, yet I did not believe he had the power to fix the sun in the sky, and command the moon to set."

"What?" Aang sputtered, taken aback. "I don't control the sun! Or the moon; I know Yue, I can't tell her what to do... are you *laughing* at me?"

"No." Shih shook his head, still smiling. "At myself. I remember being twelve. One can be very convinced of things that simply cannot be."

Aang caught his jaw hanging open, and closed it. "You don't think it's my fault." That felt weird.

"I think it is your *responsibility*," Shih said firmly. "But when one match starts a blaze, it may take an entire village to stamp it out. Even the most diligent fire-watch may miss a spark carried on the wind, that sets new blazes behind them. Is that their fault? No. But to know wind may carry sparks, and to seek out help to watch and smother them - that is their responsibility." He spread an empty hand. "Do you see the difference?"

"Kind of?" Aang mumbled. "But this was supposed to work."

"Sozin's plan to destroy the Air Nomads was supposed to work," Shih said dryly. "We are lucky that those who make plans, also make mistakes."

Augh. Why didn't anyone in the Fire Nation make sense? "But Sozin was evil!" Aang had to look away. "Even if Roku thought he was his friend."

"He was Roku's friend, once," Shih said quietly. "That is what makes his betrayal of your people so cruel."

"But if he was Roku's friend, how could he-?" Aang shuddered. "He let Roku die."

Shih let out a soundless breath. "So that is what happened. There were rumors, but..." The spirit looked down. "I wish I had an answer for you. But it lies within each of us to choose good or evil. To abandon a friend in his hour of need - that is evil. And too often, lesser evils lead one into ever greater darkness." He waved a hand at rock and ruins. "As you see."

Aang shifted on the bench, uneasy. "You're not just talking about Sozin, are you."

"No."

There was something really, really scary about how gently Shih said that.

Aang looked away. He'd think about it. Just... not right now. "You said people hid here? Who? Where are they?"

"To even speak the names might take us weeks," Shih said plainly.

"That many?" Aang objected. "This is an Air Temple! You can't get here without flying!"

"You can, if you can climb sheer cliffs," Shih noted.

"Yeah, *right*-"

"Which *many* in the Fire Nation are capable of," Shih went on dryly. "Ropes and pitons make many things possible. And dragon-children rarely need even that." He shrugged. "And those who took refuge here did not stay. They only rested, as you are resting, and healed, until they could face

the world once more." He chuckled, looking into the distance. "You would be amazed what determination this place has woken in others, to set the world right once more."

Aang bit his lip. "Is that a good thing?"

"Overall, it has been," Shih nodded. "Though I am glad the Elder nuns have mostly moved on. Some visitors here, I have had great difficulty keeping alive." He shook his head ruefully. "It is difficult enough to stay alive in this maze with two good eyes and all your wits about you. Lost in despair, with no depth perception, and unquiet spirits more than willing to make the living stumble for something *they* never did - those were frantic days."

Aang felt goosebumps prickle down his spine. "Zuko was here? Why?"

"Healing," Shih said simply. "He was gravely injured, and exiled, and did not know what to do." He looked into the distance. "Those who know the Fire Lord's court say the Caldera eats the hearts of those who would change it. I know; it almost ate mine."

Brr. But that kind of was what he felt like. As if someone had just reached inside, and torn up everything. "You kept Zuko alive?"

"And is your first question why, or why did I have to?" Shih's gaze fixed on his, deadly as fire. "The answer to the second should be obvious to one who has met ghosts before. Especially Temul."

"Air nuns wouldn't kill!" Aang protested.

"Who said kill?" Shih's voice was desert-dry. "As I said. It is difficult enough to stay alive in this temple when all your wits are about you. One moment of distraction, and ghosts can be very distracting... well." The spirit shrugged. "He had been exiled less than a week, and able to walk scarcely longer than that. Iroh was with him most of the time, and ghosts do not trifle with the Dragon of the West... but sometimes, Zuko avoided his company. He was young, and hurt, and he had just seen all the plans he had laid go up in smoke." The gold gaze cut to Aang. "Much like someone else I might mention."

Aang scowled, folding his knees up to his chest again. "*He* wasn't trying to save the whole *world*."

Shih looked at him, unimpressed. Reached out, and flicked him right on the tip of the arrow.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"If you would think, and listen, you would realize what you have said is less than true," Shih stated. "Or how well do you believe the world would fare, if Azula became Fire Lord?"

Aang froze. Azula, leading all the Fire Lord's soldiers? After she'd hurt the invasion so bad with just a few people? Oh, that was... so not good.

"It is true, Zuko was not thinking of the whole world," Shih observed. "Young men his age rarely do. But he was thinking of the Fire Nation. And the disaster he saw looming before him threatened to crush his spirit." Gold eyes bent to his. "But he would not give up. If the only way to lift his exile, to save his people, was to find the Avatar lost for a *hundred years* - then he *would* find you." Shih waved a hand, encompassing vines and sun and stone. "He found the strength to swear that here. One hopes you will find strength here, as well."

Aang frowned at him. "I'm the Avatar. There isn't anybody else stronger."

"Is that so?" Shih crossed his arms, almost amused. "Sozin was strong, yet in the end he did nothing with that strength but destroy. Is that the strength you think of? Or would you seek for strength like your friend Sokka; the strength not only to know when not to fight, but when one *must* fight, even when all the odds are against you?"

"Sokka's not..." Aang bit his lip, thinking it over.

Sokka wasn't a bender. But neither was Master Piandao. When Azula's onmitsu had taken his bending - he'd never felt so helpless. Even after the paralysis had worn off.

Sokka, Master Piandao - they must feel like that *all the time*. But even so, Master Piandao had stood up to a raging ghost to keep people from getting hurt.

Like Sokka did with Hei Bai. And Wan Shi Tong. Aang swallowed. "Somebody said, the best swords stay in their sheaths. What does that mean?"

"The simple explanation, or the thoughtful one?" Shih raised his head, as if tasting the wind. "The simple - good swords are expensive. No one wishes to damage them lightly. Better to use a cheaper blade, if killing must be done."

Ugh. "And the thoughtful one?" Aang tried. "It's about not fighting if you don't have to, right?"

"More than that," Shih stated. "The wise warrior does not simply avoid battle. He studies his surroundings, his enemies, and his allies. Know those, and you may learn how to end a fight before it is ever begun." He let his arms slip back into an easy stance. "Tales say the Avatar can speak to his predecessors. If you have spoken to Roku - and I *know* you have spoken to Temul - what do you think would have stopped the Fire Nation, before the war ever began?"

Aang winced. "Roku... he shouldn't have let the Fire Lord get away the first time he invaded the Earth Kingdom. He should have..." *I don't want to say it.* "The Avatar has to think about the whole world. Even if they were friends... if Roku had just killed him..."

"It would have been one solution." Shih's gaze was unyielding. "There are many reasons Roku did not choose it."

Aang shrugged. "They were friends-"

"Sozin was the Fire Lord. The one man who held all the Fire Nation's loyalty in his grasp. And he had no heir." Shih shook his head. "If Roku had slain him, the Earth Kingdom would have been safe - but the Fire Nation would have turned on itself, in a bloodbath no one had seen in over two hundred years. Roku feared that bloodshed. Any sane man would. So he stayed his hand." Shih sighed. "It was not, in the end, a kindness."

"But he didn't know!" Aang protested. "He couldn't have known."

"Yet he did know what drove Sozin to madness; what killed his father and grandfather before him, as they were forced to chain the spirit of Fire itself." Shih was implacable as flames. "He knew. And if he had lifted Kyoshi's decree - yes, many of us would have died. But Sozin would have had no united army to invade." His gaze softened, sad. "No army, and no navy, that could besiege four Temples across the world."

Master Gyatso. Aang swallowed. "But it wasn't Roku's *fault*."

"His fault, no. His *responsibility* - yes." Shih looked him in the eye, face grave. "Be wiser than your forebears, young one. Lift the decree from us, when you can. Think! Of all the nations that

walk this world, only Fire is chained to a bloodline of the Avatar's choosing. Would you choose Water's chiefs, or Earth's kings? The onmitsu's okashira, or the yamabushi's sohei? Set us free. Let us *go*." His voice sank. "You are right, you know. Violence, death - they are not the answer. When you fight the Fire Nation, you fight a people who in their hearts know they are lost in the darkness. Who know there is no future for their people, beyond ever more blood and death. Weapons cannot fight despair, Aang. The strongest bending cannot turn it aside. There is only one sword that can pierce it to the heart." He held out an empty hand. "Lift Kyoshi's chains. Give us hope."

"Hope?" Aang tried not to shudder. "It doesn't matter if I say nobody has to follow the Fire Lord anymore. People are already loyal to him. If you break that..." He swallowed. "It won't work."

Shih sighed. "Did Master Gyatso ever tell you the story of Ger-e Abaqai?"

Where had that come from? "The princess who stuck her finger on a needle and fell asleep for a hundred years?" Aang squinched his eyes at the spirit, trying to figure out the joke. "I always thought that was a silly kid's story. Nobody can fall asleep for a hundred years... eheh."

Shih smirked a little, but shook his head. "You have forgotten part of the tale. She was not cursed to sleep. The dark spirit who came to the name ceremony meant her to die."

"Right," Aang agreed, trying to dredge up the memory. "But there was one little spirit everybody had forgotten. A well-spirit, right? When the queen was a little girl, she'd cleaned up its shrine, so..."

"That child of hidden waters twisted the curse," Shih nodded. "Not death, but sleep." He waited, silent and sad.

No. Please, no. "She couldn't break the curse," Aang got out. "She didn't have enough power... it's not *fair*."

"Life is not fair," Shih stated. "We can only deal with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be." He turned a hand palm up, as if offering a broken cup. "If those of the Fire Nation break loyalty - yes, they may die. But if they must also face the wrath of the whole world for defying the Fire Lord, they *will* die. Zuko has only survived so long because most spirits cannot see who he is, until it is too late." A soft sigh. "The Fire Nation has brought death and despair to the world, and the world itself demands we balance the scale with our own blood. You cannot save us from that. I know you wish to. I am proud that you wish to; that even in the midst of war, you hope for life. The world needs that hope." He touched Aang's shoulder, a sunbeam-brush of warmth. "But it also needs your strength. The strength to face the truth. To see what you can do, and what you cannot. You cannot break this curse, Aang. You can only soften it. And that is not your fault. Let it *go*."

Aang scrubbed at his eyes. It was dusty in here. Yeah. "But I'm the Avatar. I'm supposed to fix things."

"You carry the spirit of the world, yes," Shih acknowledged. "You are also a very young man; younger than even Kuzon was, when he tried to save what he could. No one with a heart could expect you to set the whole world right once more." His gaze flicked to the side, just for a moment.

Like there's someone else there. Someone I can't see.

His heart hurt. All he wanted was to go bury himself in Appa's fur and never, ever come out. But he had to know.

If the Avatar's like a hurricane...

It was tricky, using the meditations Master Gyatso had taught him when everything hurt so much. But Aang held his breath, and made himself still.

Vine-shadows shifted, blurring into orange robes, long black hair, and a trembling smile.

No tattoos. She's not a master? "I know you," Aang said thoughtfully. "I saw you-"

Twice. He'd seen her beyond Temul's vision. Though it'd been just a glimpse with Roku, of a sweating, tear-streaked face. "You were there when I was born!"

"It would have been difficult for her *not* to be," Shih said dryly.

"Huh?" Aang frowned at the spirit. "You're not making any sense-"

The ghost-woman scooped him up into a hug, moonlight tears trickling down her cheeks. "You're all right," she choked out. "When Shih told me Makoto chased you, I was so worried. I thought you were going to die..."

"Um. Ma'am?" Aang tried to squirm loose, without making it too obvious. "Gyate, right? I'm okay. Really. Could you maybe let go? Please?"

She stiffened, sleeves brushing him like a cool fall wind. Closed her eyes, tears still streaming, and started to fade.

"Beloved." Shih had a hand on her shoulder, color flooding outward from that touch. "It is the Temple training. Even with almost a year in the world, he does not think of many things." His gaze went over her shoulder, smoldering when it touched Aang's. "Young man. I know Gyatso raised you to think. Do so. Who is the one woman who *must* be present at a birth?"

"Um..."

"If you say the midwife, I will show you one of my old master's lessons." Shih gave him an unimpressed up-and-down look. "That generally leaves one unconscious half the day. And you would deserve every moment of the headache."

He meant it, too, Aang realized. Toph got that look, when she was about to show a chunk of metal who was *really* boss. "But... Air Nomads don't have parents," Aang protested, wondering if he could press himself through a stone wall. Or if it would do any good, with spirits involved.

"Don't have-" Tears slowing, Gyate clapped a hand to her forehead in disbelief. "Ooo, Master Gyatso, if I get my hands on you-!"

"Some boys take their elders too literally," Shih murmured. Raised his voice a little, still kneading Gyate's shoulder. "Aang. I know you are old enough not to believe the stories of being found under a cabbage leaf. The sons and daughters of the Temples were not *raised* by parents, that is true. But that does not mean you do not *have* them."

It was like saying rain was supposed to fall up. Or sky bison hatched out of eggs. Or somebody like Hama was what waterbenders were *supposed* to be. Airbenders didn't have parents. Just teachers. "How would you even know you're my mother?" Aang argued. "Master Gyatso had me when I was two!"

"I know." Gyate's eyes were wet again. "I was there when the Elders gave you to him."

Aang blinked, taken aback. That was... well, everybody knew what teachers did. They went to the

East and West Temples and came back with little kids. Nobody ever said anything about... about other people being involved.

"The Elders let us know that much," Gyate went on, gaze distant. "So no one runs into a... bad situation at the festivals. We know our children's names, and who their teachers are." She looked at him again, face an odd mix of sad and happy at the same time. "But I guess it was different for boys. They never had to know they even had children. So the Elders didn't have to... convince them to give them up."

"Convince them?" Aang echoed, uneasy. This had something to do with why talking about parents upset Katara, he just knew it. "You're supposed to. Why do the Elders have to talk you into anything?"

Gyate made a hurt noise, eyes wide and so, so gray. Shih touched her hand, and shook his head. "Beloved. He is a boy. Let me try."

"And why do you keep calling her that?" Aang muttered, half to himself. "She's a *nun*. That's creepy."

Shih closed his eyes, just for a moment. "One begins to wonder how one ever survived one's apprenticeship." Shaking his head, he opened his eyes. "Aang. You have seen bison calves with their mother. How she cares for them, looks after them; teaches them to soar, until they are ready to live on their own."

"But that's sky bison, not people," Aang pointed out. "We're supposed to be different."

Shih's gaze was a bottomless pool of gold. "Why?"

"Well, because..."

Shih waited.

Why did he get the feeling *because the Elders say so* wasn't going to work?

Maybe because you know Master Gyatso didn't agree with them?

Well, yeah; Master Gyatso disagreed with the Elders all the time. About training, about seeing other parts of the world; even about having fun at all. The Elders didn't want anything in his life but training, that was why they were going to take him away from Master Gyatso-

And that didn't happen to other kids. Any other kids. You didn't take a student away from his teacher. It wasn't right.

"Katara and Sokka say parents are like teachers," Aang said at last. "If they're right, then - why did we do that? Why would we take kids away from their first teachers?"

"Ah." Shih's smile warmed his eyes. "Now, that is a good question. One I am not unfamiliar with."

"You would be." Gyate sniffled a little, and poked Shih in the shoulder. "I still say your master's nuts."

"He trained me, did he not?" Shih inclined his head to Aang. "I do know how those of Air feel about your teachers. I feel much the same for mine."

Huh?

"I was orphaned young," Shih stated, "and not a firebender. But a master born of Air took me in, and raised me, and I love him even as you love Master Gyatso."

Aang's jaw dropped. "You were raised by an airbender?" Whoa. "You must be... *really* confused."

"I was raised by one born to Air," Shih corrected. "He was not a bender."

"But that's not possible," Aang protested. "We're all benders. We're the most spiritual nation in the world!"

Gyate winced. "All the children you knew were benders."

"Well... yeah," Aang admitted. "Isn't that what I said?" Oh, he really didn't feel good about this. "Why are you so sad?"

Gyate's hand crept into Shih's. "Aang... even in the Temples, not everybody was born a bender."

His stomach seemed to be tying itself into knots. "But - every Air Nomad's a bender!"

"Everyone claimed by the Temples was," Shih stated. "When it comes to Air... by two years of age, one can tell who is a bender, and who is not." A subtle shrug. "After all, the Elders claimed the Temples were only for those blessed by the spirits. And if some mothers must lose their unblessed children, then all must. Or it wouldn't be *fair*."

Aang had never heard the word said that way. Like it wanted to crawl down his throat and gouge out his heart, and that was just to start with.

"Our Temples weren't always like that," Gyate said firmly. "Before Yangchen died, they were places to teach and learn. People went there to seek the Autumn Lord. To find teachers to perfect their bending. To heal." She waved a hand at Aang; he almost felt a brush of air. "And teachers *adopted* students. With their family's permission."

"How do you know that?" Aang asked, still dazed. "Master Gyatso didn't know that!" *Or he didn't tell me.* Aang wasn't sure which option was scarier.

Pale fingers gripped sword-callused ones. "We know, because Shih was onmitsu," Gyate answered. "They still have some of the stories. And... there are other people who have more."

Other people. Gyatso's message had said there were airbenders left, who'd been hiding from the Temple... "It's not just onmitsu," Aang blurted out. "Temul showed us, I didn't get it - the onmitsu went after Kuzon when he wasn't in Byakko! They can't get in! Which means..." Oh. Oh, spirits. "Yuan-ti's letter. Renegades on *Mount Shiroto*. Gyatso even told me! Shidan's hiding airbenders. He's hiding them in Byakko!" Oh... oh, he was going to be sick. "That's why Shidan wouldn't help us. The onmitsu can't get in without him knowing, but if the Fire Lord *orders* Kotone to let them in... and now Ozai knows Shidan was helping us-!"

"Head down. Breathe slowly." Somehow, Shih had moved between blinks, rubbing the back of Aang's neck with slow, careful pressure. "Byakko has weathered the Fire Lord's wrath before. True, they are in danger. But the yamabushi are *not* helpless. And running off to save them will only kill you all. I know it is hard. I do know! But you must stop. And *think*."

Think. Sure. When all he could see was a frightened face hiding behind Shidan, scared out of her wits even after they'd rescued her from Hama. "Hitomi," Aang blurted out. "Shidan was hiding a yamabushi *right there*. He gave me Gyatso's message about other airbenders, but he never said *anything*."

"Byakko has hidden them since Yangchen's death," Shih stated. "The habits of a thousand years are not easily broken."

"No," Aang managed, trying not to look too closely at the ruins. "I guess they wouldn't be. And Gyatso wanted me to figure stuff out on my own." Which hurt. But at the same time - spirits, this mess was so big. If Gyatso had tried to tell him about it, all at once...

Maybe I never would have been able to do it at all.

"I need to think about this," Aang muttered. "I need to meditate."

"We will give you peace to do so, then," Shih nodded. "Though I will not be far. The Temple is *mostly* quiet - but there are still spirits that might trouble you, when you need peace most." He smiled. "One will be careful with the betobeto. Toph seems a very feisty young lady, and one would not wish to harm any of her friends."

Gyate caught his shoulder before he could fade. "Wait. Just a little longer." She drew nearer, gray eyes searching Aang's face. "There's something you don't understand about the Fire Nation. Something I didn't understand for a long time." She spread open hands. "They're afraid of you, because they think you have to have revenge."

"What?" Aang yelped. "But - I'm an Air Nomad!"

"And who of them knows what that means, in these days of war?" Shih observed. "General Iroh, Prince Zuko; your own friends Sokka and Toph. People who can look out from their own nations' view of the world, and try to grasp another, are rare. If you were Fire Nation, you would be forced to take revenge for your father's death. So that is what many of them expect."

Aang tried to pick his jaw up off the balcony. "But - I didn't even know my father!"

"And Monk Gyatso, who was father to you in all but blood, would never ask for revenge," Shih nodded. "I know. But Gyate is right. If you can tell those of the Fire Nation that your father was not slain by their hands - which is the truth - they may believe that you might spare them. At the least, that you are not *forced* to kill them." He shrugged. "You have seen the Fire Nation's tenacity when they believe it is fight or die. But if you can offer them another way, a chance for honorable surrender..."

"You think some of them might take it," Aang finished. "That would... it'd really help. Thanks." He frowned. "But how do you know what happened to my father?"

"Er..."

"He lived in Byakko," Gyate stepped in. "He was a teacher. And a healer."

Aang frowned, seeing something just a little off about her stance. *Is she standing on his foot?*

"You were a better one," Shih murmured.

"I wouldn't have had the chance, if you hadn't-" Gyate bit her lip. "Aang? This is very important. I hope Gyatso told you, but nobody told *me*, and if Shih hadn't been there... The Fire Nation knows all about fire. That means they deal with smoke, and *that* means most of them know what to do if someone stops breathing. You need a friend who can do that. If you're the Avatar, and you have to... go against Gyatso's teachings to stop the war... you need someone who can breathe for you." She squeezed Shih's hand. "I had to, to save Shih. And then he had to save me."

"You went against the Elders?" Stunned, Aang waved toward her unmarked forehead. "Is that why you're not a master? What'd you do?"

"What we're not ever supposed to do." She took one step forward-

And drew Shih's sword.

Her moves weren't like Master Piandao's; whipcord-strong, quick and hard like bamboo snapping back in your face. Instead, the blade floated in her hands, smooth arcs that whispered through air like blowing snow.

Deadly snow. Aang had seen enough warriors to know that. It chilled him. "Why?"

A final salute, and she returned the sword to its sheath. "Because there are movements of air a staff won't show you," Gyate said briskly. "We lost them when Xiangchen took away our swords. Without them, we can't heal."

Water could heal. Earth could; Toph had proved it, even if it wiped her out. Even fire could heal - and that still made his head hurt. But air? "Air is air," Aang said firmly. "If you can move it with a sword, you can do it with a staff."

"I hope you can," Gyate said fervently. "But whatever happens? There's one thing you need to know."

"Yeah?" Aang said cautiously.

Orange sleeves wrapped around him. "I love you," Gyate whispered in his ear. "And I know you don't know what to do about that. But you don't *have* to." Reluctantly, she let go. "Mothers love their children. That's just the way it is." Her voice caught. "And I'm so glad Gyatso was your master. He was a good man."

Aang swallowed, throat scratchy. "I miss him."

"I know." Gyate smiled, proud and sad. "Whatever you decide, I know he's proud of you. I am."

Sunlight shimmered, and they were gone.

Aang scrubbed at his face, and rested his chin on his fist. Think. Yeah. He had to do that. Byakko was in trouble because of them, the whole world was, and he wasn't sure what to do next.

Lift Kyoshi's decree. Maybe it would help... but a lot of people would die. Aang winced. *But if the Fire Lord isn't stopped, a lot of people are going to die anyway. What should I do? I'm supposed to fix this-*

No. Wait. That was what Shih had been trying to tell him.

I'm not supposed to fix things. I'm responsible for fixing them. There's a difference.

And just because somebody was responsible for making things right, didn't mean they always could.

Responsible means you have to try. And - if you think you can't do it on your own, you have to ask for help.

He already knew he couldn't beat the Fire Lord by himself. So... what could he do about Kyoshi's decree? Could one Avatar even try to change what another Avatar had done?

One way to find out.

Closing his eyes, Aang reached for the spirit world.

Chapter 70

Chapter Notes

Warning, there's stuff in this chapter that's not going to be pretty. As Sherman said, "war is hell." And he meant it. In the cartoon, you never see real war, a serious battlefield, or even any armies. In this chapter... Fong has an army. Zuko has Uncle Iroh, a Dai Li, a ship's worth of sailors and marines, some Yu Yan, and a bunch of grimly determined amateurs. There are only two good points about this situation. First, Zuko's people know the terrain better. Second, historically besiegers need to outnumber defenders by at least 5 to 1; though 10 to 1 gives the besieging side much more room to make mistakes.

Which means when it comes to survival, Dragons' Wings has one grim necessity: *cut those numbers.*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

I can't do this, Xiu thought frozenly, knees knocking together in terror as the soldier behind her shoved her down the trail, toward a distant, innocuous pile of logs. The mountain air was warm with summer sun, wafting a scent of crushed yellow-bonnets and a surprising taste of salt. The trail leading toward the logs was half dry, half patches of muck every foot had tried to step around. The Fire Nation had hidden enough caltrops in wet holes that nobody with sense put any part of their body where they couldn't see it.

And all of it was a blur, angry murmurs of men drowned out by the pounding of her heart. She'd seen the results of Zuko's war of attrition since that awful day of the mud-avalanche. Seen them, heard them, smelled them. The wounded, the maimed crying out for an end to pain, the wet red shreds that were all that had been left after careless scouts had charged a fragile barricade of brush and dirt.

The barricade had been fragile. The spring-loaded slivers of steel hidden in it... not so much.

Spring-loaded blades. Scorpion-bees in hidden clay pots. Weevil-rats lobbed into the supply train. Tunnels hollowed under green patches of grass and herbs, filled with rattle-vipers all too willing to bite what stepped on them. Every rock, every tree, every patch of weeds might hide another booby trap. General Fong had been forced to use his scouts to comb every last inch of ground before his main army set foot on it, and the general was *not* happy. After all, scouts were highly trained soldiers, usually earthbenders. They were valuable. They were finite.

And Zuko's killing them.

Lucky for Fong, there were plenty of less valuable people available. Lots of farmers. No few refugees, who'd apparently been trying to find places with the farmers. And one stray silk-weaver.

I can't do this, Xiu thought. *I'm going to die - this isn't even my war!*

"Deep breath." A warm hand pressed against her shoulder, the shorter woman supporting Xiu when she almost stumbled. "It's okay. We're going to be all right."

"No, we're not," Xiu croaked. Some of her vision seemed to clear, and she glared hate at the slabs of stone sheltering a general. "You can't do this! This is crazy!"

"Days ago, the Avatar invaded the Fire Nation to battle the Fire Lord," General Fong said sternly. "A twelve-year-old boy, the *last* airbender, the only survivor of that peaceful people the Fire Nation murdered, has taken up arms to face the most evil creature this world has ever known! In the face of that boy's courage, how can even the most frail citizen of our kingdom turn away from battling such monsters? Firebenders, who have the temerity to lay claim to Earth Kingdom territory, and the black treachery to lie in the Earth King's name!" His tone softened; now only proud as steel. "It's barely a few more miles to whatever *firebenders* might be able to build as defenses. Be proud; with your aid, we will crush them under the stone fist of the Earth Kingdom!"

Spirits, she hated him. And she hated Sergeant Bo more.

He just let them take me. He just let them-!

Another shove, and she almost bit her tongue.

"Keep your head together," the refugee woman murmured. "If this one's the same as the others, there should be a riddle."

The sheer incongruity of it seemed to crack the ice in Xiu's brain. "A riddle?" Ice was turning into white-hot shards, a blazing fury that threatened to choke off thinking almost as much as the fear. "Are you telling me these things are a *game*?"

"More like a prayer." The woman's green eyes fixed on a scrap of white pinned to the ground a few yards ahead of the barricade. "General Fong has a reputation."

"A reputation for doing *this*?" Xiu hissed. The soldier had fallen yards behind them, but she put the thought of running out of her mind. She had to. Fong had shown he could and *would* sink men into the ground, then shove them wherever he wanted. At least if she had her feet free, she had the illusion of a chance. "Then why hasn't one of the nobles done something? King Bumi's half crazy, but if anybody tried to use Omashu's people like this-!"

Her companion almost laughed. "I guess I didn't say *where* he has a reputation."

Huh?

"Read it," she nodded toward the paper. "Let's see if we both have the same solution." She took a deep breath, and sighed it out. "I want to see my family again in this world." Her voice turned rueful. "You know, my husband's going to tell me, *I told you so*, and I'm going to nod and say, *yes, dear*. This is... a lot more adventure than I was looking for."

You're telling me. Xiu looked her up and down, trying to piece together accent and clothes and the odd calluses on her hands that suddenly didn't seem to fit. *Those aren't farmers' hands.* "Who are you?"

"My name's Luli." The older woman smiled. "I wonder if you're the Xiu I heard about." She waved at black characters on paper. "So what do you make of that?"

Respect to the lord of the land is never unwise.

Xiu shook her head, fury and despair churning in her gut. "If bowing down to the Earth King did any good, I wouldn't be here!"

Luli started to speak; then obviously changed her mind, and gave the weaver a look askance. "On the farms, we heard that Prince Zuko's men shot copies of the treaty right into the general's camp. Didn't anyone get to read them?"

"Maybe," Xiu said warily, shifting uncomfortably. "What does that have to do with-"

Under her foot, something clicked.

"*Down!*"

Luli dragged her to the earth with a mother's ferocious strength, their knees and hands thumping onto disturbed soil heartbeats before steel keened overhead.

Screams behind them. Xiu froze. *We're dead, we're-*

Thumps, as if the air itself wanted to rattle her bones. Smoke billowed around them, stinging midnight clouds.

"Run!"

Xiu let Luli drag her; head reeling, hands skinned and throbbing. Luli was charging right at the barrier, and that didn't make sense-!

One of the bigger logs - a stump? - didn't look right.

She's going headfirst into that-

Bark-brown tore like paper. Xiu felt her jaw drop as she was dragged through. And regretted it; whatever was in that smoke burned like cinni-chilis down her throat.

She ran anyway. Smoke and screaming were behind them. General Fong was behind them, and her feet wouldn't take her anywhere closer to him no matter what disasters might lie in wait. Fear and pain and craziness, and she couldn't go back, her father would tell her not to go back, Fong was as crazy as any Chin villager and nobody, nobody thought there was anything wrong with that, when had some of the army gone *crazy*-?

She never saw the rope.

She did see sky and ground flip places, as something yanked her up; blood rushing to her head, robes falling into her eyes, oh spirits what *now*?

"Sergeant!" Luli's voice. Upset.

Upset, not scared. Xiu tried to think; mouth full of her own loose hair, the world spinning around her. *I'm trapped, I'm going to die, and she can't even scream?*

"Orders, ma'am." A rough, matter-of-fact man's voice, moving closer to her. "Miss? Fong's going to need time to clear that area. But earthbenders can move pretty damn fast. Now, if you're a good Earth Kingdom citizen... well, you did your duty, and you obviously got caught by some sneaky, dishonorable Fire Nation types who - lucky for you - just couldn't stick around to do all the evil things everybody knows firebenders do. Right?"

Xiu tried to blink silk away from her eyes. This made no sense whatsoever. "Um..."

"But if you're not - well, you're probably good, but maybe not good the way *Fong* thinks, he's kind of a few coals short of a bonfire-"

And that was a woman's voice. Which really didn't make sense, given it bounced up to her with a metal-armor jingle.

"-So if you're kind of a sane person, and you figured out Fong's the kind of guy who throws bamboo knots into a fire just to watch them go boom - and you know nobody does that, because hello, *splinters*, could take your eye out-"

"Fushi." The man's voice was stern, but Xiu could have sworn there was a laugh in it.

"Right! Wasting time, got it boss." Pale hands lifted cloth away from Xiu's face, and gold eyes grinned down into blue. "There you are! Want to come with us?"

"They're going to get away!" Sima called over the wind.

Teo let his glance flick to her glider, swallowed hard, and casually banked about ninety degrees from the direction red armor was scampering through the greenery. "Then let's go *this* way."

He couldn't see Sima frown behind her own goggles, but he could read it in the hunch of her shoulders. Still, she followed as he turned away; so if Fong *did* happen to look up at the little flecks of color in the sky, they wouldn't be showing him where Zuko's people were getting the woman to safety.

Thanks, Sima. And he'd drop back to tell her that, but losing any speed or altitude here just seemed like a *bad* idea-

Freeing one hand for a moment, Sima waved it through the tricky little wriggle that wafted up an extra breeze, so she could catch up to easy listening distance. "Something you wanted to say?"

She was grinning, Teo noticed, catching the flash of teeth in the shadow of her wings. He couldn't blame her, even if Changchang did lecture them about eating bugs raw. Riding the wind was awesome. Being able to call your *own* wind, when you needed it? There weren't words for the way that felt. "Yeah!" he called back. "Thanks!"

Glancing back behind them, Sima lost the grin. "So... this is a good thing?"

"I don't know," Teo admitted. "I don't think I've ever seen that woman before-"

"No way," Sima said firmly. "I saw her shadow. She's *tall*."

Despite the mess behind them, Teo grinned. So far he was ahead of all the gliders in airbending, but Sima was one of the best at judging distances on the ground from high in the air. "So if we don't know her, she shouldn't be part of this mess. I'm glad she's still alive."

"Yeah. She is." Sima's voice was small. "But what happens when the general goes after them?"

"They'll hit more traps," Teo said honestly. "I know." Even from these heights, they'd all seen too many of the dead and wounded after one of Dragons' Wings' *riddles* hit home.

"Why won't he just stop?" Sima burst out.

Teo snorted.

"*It's not funny!*"

"No. It's not," Teo said ruefully, shifting his weight to take more advantage of the wind. "It's just..."

I've been thinking about that. And I think I finally figured it out." He winced. "Why did War Minister Qin keep coming? He knew we had the Avatar on our side."

"But... General Fong's *Earth Kingdom*," Sima protested.

"I know. But that doesn't mean they're different. Not when it comes to fighting." Teo grimaced. "Or more like... *why* they fight. Fong wants the world to work his way. And he's not listening to anyone who tells him it doesn't."

Not even his own people. You couldn't really see expressions from a thousand feet up, but you could see motion. The jerky way that strange lady had moved, walking up to almost certain death because any other option would be worse-

"She was so scared." Sima shuddered. "I hate this! I hate all of it! The prince is *killing* people, and - and-"

"And you don't think he's wrong," Teo said bluntly. Gathered his courage, and told the truth. "Neither do I."

The edge of her wing dipped, before she got herself back under control. "But... it's *horrible*."

"Yeah. It is. I wish I could hate him," Teo said fervently. "I wish I could hate all the firebenders. But if I did that... I'd have to hate our people, too."

"But *why*?"

Seeing better doesn't always mean you know more of what's going on, Teo thought. "Because even if Zuko's setting up those traps to kill people - he's not the one making people walk into them. People who aren't even soldiers."

And that was yet another twisting anger in his gut, even with a cool breeze to waft calm through his hair. He'd fought the Fire Nation, sure, even though he wasn't a soldier. Everyone in the Temple had. But nobody had *made* them fight.

Everyone in Dragons' Wings was fighting. It wasn't pretty. It wasn't fair. But at least it was their choice.

"They're giving Fong the same chance we gave Qin," Teo called over the wind. "Go away, and no one gets hurt. Just go away, and leave us *alone*."

Or else.

For a long moment, they just rode in the wind, turning toward the greenery that cloaked Asagitatsu's rim. And cloaked other, more vicious things, Teo guessed; though from up here, he wouldn't know a trap until it bit him.

"You know what's weird?" Sima said at last. "It kind of reminds me of some of those arm-swirls Langxue was showing us."

"Does, doesn't it?" Teo said thoughtfully. "Deflect your opponent's force away. Never take a blow if you can dodge it." He cut a glance toward her. "Give the other guy a chance to stop *himself*."

"But they're Fire, not Air." Her shoulders shifted, sliding her through the wind. "They can't keep dodging. It's... it's not what they *do*."

"No. It's not." Teo caught the updraft curling off the caldera wall, and used it to turn with Sima, circling up like a gyr-eagle. Inside the bowl of earth and sea terraces spread out below them; waves shimmering with white foam near the docks, fish and seaweed drying in the sun and hung over burning fires. "Look at that, Sima. One crazy earthbender in there, and they could lose everything."

And oh, the irony burned. Zuko had told him that, and he hadn't believed it. Not then. Because firebenders might burn crops and forests to the ground, but earthbenders didn't attack farms. *Everybody* knew that.

Everybody but Fong. You could see his army's track gouged this way from the air; everything that should be summer-green and gold, now seared brown and dying.

Teo glanced down at flickers of flame, where Zuko's people were carefully prying the pressure out of Asagitatsu, one bubble of firedamp at a time. *If Fong tears up the caldera the same way he tore up the farms-*

"What about the caldera?" Sima called to him.

Had he said that out loud? Or maybe the worry was just too obvious on his face. "I was thinking about the gas in the earth!"

From Sima's grimace, so had she. "I think it feels better than it did last week. I just wish they could pull the plug on all of it, instead of just poking little holes-" She went pale.

Teo nodded, grim. "We should land. And talk."

A few more minutes, and they'd snagged thermals up to one of the Temple's highest towers, touching down on sun-warmed stone. Teo used the grab-stick his father had made to snatch one of the tie-downs, locking his glider against buffeting winds before he rolled free. "Sima? You okay?"

Collapsing her glider, she shivered. "It's like a cork in a wine-bottle. Dragons' Wings keeps punching little holes, so the pressure can bleed off. But if Fong rips the cork out..."

Teo shared her wince. "I don't think even Aang could stop it." And even if Zuko was wrong, and Asagitatsu wasn't strong enough to wreck half the world-

The people down there don't have a whole mountain between them and the blast. They'd be torn apart.

If Fong didn't beat the volcano to it.

And he's going to try. He's making his own people walk into deathtraps just to clear the way. If he's willing to do that just to get to firebenders...

Zuko was right. General Fong didn't want Dragons' Wings gone. He wanted them *dead*.

Zuko was right. Teo hunched against a chill breeze, memory a sour taste in his mouth. He'd brushed off the firebender's warnings, convinced they couldn't be in real danger if they just told Fong what he wanted to hear. If they just *talked* to him...

The Temple's lowland relatives had tried talking. The track of ruin scrawled over the earth showed how well *that* had worked.

"What can we do?" Sima was chafing her arms, chilled; Teo had to take a second look to be sure, because lately none of the gliders seemed to get cold, no matter how brisk the wind was. "It's not

like fighting Qin, Teo. They're earthbenders."

"Earthbenders who think they've got the right to throw out anybody who isn't," Teo grumbled, "even when it's their land..." He stared into the distance, suddenly shaken.

"Teo?"

Teo had to swallow, twice. "We're not earthbenders."

"No, but..." She dashed to the parapet, looking in the direction of Fong's army, though you couldn't quite make it out from this angle. "You don't think...?"

"I don't know what to think," Teo admitted. "Except that Zuko was trying to warn us. And I didn't listen."

Sima glanced back at him, eyes wide behind her goggles. "So what do we do?"

"I'm not sure yet," Teo breathed. "But we'd better start thinking. Fast."

"Whoof. You look like the wrong end of a hurricane night."

Sitting down by the small fountain, Xiu pulled the warm green blanket a bit tighter around herself, trying to muster a glare for the grinning firebender tucked into a corner of Amaya's house of healing. It wasn't easy. He wasn't wearing armor, he was almost leaning into a brazier to get closer to the heat, his black hair was sticking out at all kinds of awkward angles, and that wicked grin had just the least rueful tilt to it. Like her father's, when something had gone spectacularly, but not fatally, wrong.

And he had a cast on one ankle. How could he be a properly scary monster of a firebender with blue-painted white plaster from foot to knee?

"Charming, as always, Rikiya," Corporal Shoni said dryly. "For all the time you spent in the capital, one would think even a man with your thick skull would know better than to compare a lady to a storm-drowned idiot."

"Hey! Ix-nay on the capital thing." Rikiya waved shushing hands; winced as his weight shifted. "I'm an honest man these days. Ask anybody."

"I do not have to ask." Shoni smirked. "They tell me. In great detail." He slid a glance Xiu's way. "Mistress Xiu. Lieutenant Sadao or one of the other healers should be here to check you shortly. If you find Private Rikiya bothersome, please, hit him over the head. I am certain he will enjoy the attention."

A red shadow of armor and knives, he swept out of the room.

"I'm not that bad," Rikiya muttered. "Am I that bad?"

Xiu drew in a breath to tell him exactly what she thought about the past few weeks of insanity. Of being sacrificed by an Earth general, and rescued by a crazy refugee from Ba Sing Se and *firebenders*, and abandoned by the refugee when her family showed up... which okay, husband and children, Xiu could mostly understand that - but Luli had left her with *more firebenders*, in the middle of a crazy town full of people in green, blue, brown, and crimson, and now she was with a firebender in a *waterbender's* house of healing, and when had the world gone *crazy*-

She sobbed.

"Oh. Not good. Um. I think Moriaki left some tea over there, I can warm it up... I'm not supposed to be walking on this..."

"Move, and I let Jia use you for earth-healing practice." The blue-clad healer bustled in with a basket full of herbs and fresh bread, rich with a scent of spicy oil that made Xiu's mouth water. "The scrolls say earth and bones are tightly linked. But maybe you'd like her to get a little more practice before she tackles your ankle?"

"Yes ma'am. Sitting still. Honest." Rikiya slid a pleading glance Xiu's way.

Help, Mom on patrol! Xiu translated that look. *He's asking me for help?* "What is this place?" she managed. "Who are you? I didn't see you with Chief Hakoda's fleet - and they wouldn't send one of their benders to help the Fire Nation..."

"They didn't." The matronly woman looked her up and down, checking for visible injuries. "I am Amaya, originally of the Northern Water Tribe and now of Dragons' Wings. Though I spent the past few decades in Ba Sing Se, up until a few months ago."

"Ba Sing Se?" Xiu repeated, flummoxed. "You mean Luli's not the only one here?" It sort of made sense. A little. Maybe.

"Almost everybody here is from Ba Sing Se," Rikiya filled her in. "Except for those of us from *Suzuran*, and some Yu Yan, and the folks the prince picked up in Gaipan - interesting people, just a little twitchy if you mention the word *flood*... and you want me to stop talking. I can do that."

"I doubt it," Amaya said wryly. "Though if you could slow down, it would be appreciated. You marines may eat rattle-vipers for breakfast, but she's had a rough day."

"For breakfast? Who've you been talking to? Sukekuni, right?" Rikiya wagged his brows at Xiu. "Poor newbie still hasn't gotten the hang of marine cooking. *Never* have them for breakfast. You spit-roast them, then dice them up with eggs and garlic on a strand of noodle. Much more classy."

Xiu blinked at him.

"They take some getting used to," Amaya advised, dipping her hands in water to run glowing fingers over Xiu's head and shoulders. "But Sergeant Kyo's squad are very good people. Even if a few of them are thick-headed."

"Hey! I resemble that remark."

...Oh, she hadn't even noticed now much her head was hurting until it stopped. Xiu cleared her throat. "What's going on? You said the prince, so Lee - I mean, Prince Zuko - really is here? With people from Ba Sing Se? Why?"

"Hmm. Luli was right, then," Amaya said thoughtfully. "No one in the Earth Army believed the Earth King signed a treaty with Prince Zuko?"

"Would we believe it if Fong fired stuff at us about the Fire Lord signing off with King Bumi?" Rikiya shrugged. "Though from what the boss says about Bumi, he's crazy enough to invite airbenders to move right into Omashu. Guess we're just lucky Earth King Kuei wants us between the Earth Kingdom and the Temple."

"Between?" Xiu got out. It felt like she had the edges of a tattered scroll, trying to unroll it and still

keep the pieces together. "The treaty's really real? But why would the Earth King give up land to... um."

"Firebenders, Earth refugees, and other scattered misfits my apprentice has picked up along the way?" Amaya smiled. "According to King Kuei, historically earth and air can have problems trying to live together. He wants airbending back in the world, but he wants it to have a fresh start, without stirring up the old quarrels. Putting Fire and its allies as a buffer between his people and the gliders sounded like a good idea."

"Airbending?" Xiu's head felt healed, but now it was reeling again.

"Working out a treaty with Prince Zuko got several hundred problems out of Ba Sing Se, gave Kuei a precedent for future treaties if the Avatar succeeds - Earth *loves* precedents - and was supposed to give us all somewhere we could live without bothering anyone." Amaya's smile turned wry. "But I don't think Kuei ever predicted General Fong sticking his nose into the middle of everything."

Now that was an understatement. "Airbending?" Xiu repeated, numbly accepting the spiced roll Amaya handed her. She looked at Rikiya, who'd at least acted like he was making sense. "And... you're a firebender, and you're helping them? I'm sorry, this is just - so *weird*..."

"You should see how weird it is from this side of the fire," Rikiya said thoughtfully. "We're the boss' squad. We go where he goes. Which... probably makes more sense if you know about my boss. Sergeant Kyo. The rumor you need silver arrows to kill him? Completely false. It's never worked."

Amaya clapped a hand to her forehead in disbelief. "Private Rikiya..."

"Right, start from the beginning," the firebender nodded. "I first met the boss when - oh. Let me make something perfectly clear. The artworks? I won't lie. They were mine. Very classy. But I was *totally* innocent of the loaded dice..."

"Your tea is growing cold," Uncle Iroh observed.

"Tastes the same either way." Zuko sipped cooling leaf juice, comparing the note Teo's gliders had dropped with the array of Earth Army markers ranged on their map of the area. Some of Teo's observations matched what they already knew from scouts, spyglasses, and judicious use of the war-balloon the gliders had let them borrow in the scramble of Fong's arrival... and somehow neglected to take back. The others - huh. Hard to tell what was lack of experience, what would have been hidden by tree cover, and what was really something his scouts had missed... and Teo's, with years of experience gliding over the valleys, hadn't.

He can figure out where we're venting by checking out the air currents. Air that's been hanging out with clouds bends different from air that's taken a detour through stone. That's... interesting.

It wasn't just vents Teo had found, either. Professor Wen would want to know about the shreds of a ruin on the rim of the caldera; just a few crazily-piled boulders on the outside, but some of Teo's gliders had turned up bits of the same odd blue-and-silver glazed cups that rested in the White Lotus cache. And the fishy sea-salt draft through it meant it had to go *much* deeper than the shrink-swell clays cloaking the outer edge of the caldera wall. Deep enough to carve through mountain stone.

If this were another White Lotus site, who knew what might be in there. Even if it wasn't - the fact that there was *anything* left from before Asagitatsu had blown her top the last time hinted at even

more bending techniques they might be able to recreate. Stone didn't stand up to volcanic blasts by accident.

Still. That was for after they didn't have Fong breathing down their neck. For now - Teo was a trained glider, not a trained scout. And even Fong wasn't dumb enough to miss gliders overhead, or the advantages eyes in the sky could give. He had to be taking countermeasures.

But at least Teo's figured out that Fong's not their friend, Zuko thought. That might keep the Temple alive. If he's not just trying to play one of us off against the other...

Zuko rubbed his forehead, trying to drive off reflexive paranoia. Teo was like Aang. He *believed* in people. Some of the elders in the Temple might have considered playing cow-chicken with two armies, but anything that underhanded probably hadn't even crossed Teo's mind. Probably.

Warmth moved next to him, as a former general swept his own gaze over their predicament. "Staring at the map will not change reality, nephew," Iroh said quietly.

"I know that. I just..." Zuko winced, looking at the figures that were their best estimate of Fong's forces, poised to spill over into the channel of hills that led to the most passable low point in the caldera wall; a steep, thin gap, like a chip out of a bowl. The Chip was where Fong would hit the first line of solid defenses; bent stone walls sheathed with mucky logs and laced with sharp steel from ruined tanks. Effective, strong... but with all too few defenders manning them. "There should have been more we could do."

"I have known units of the Fire Army who would have done less with the time and materials we had." Iroh rested a hand on his shoulder. "If the worst should happen... I have sent word to contacts in the North. They may yet come. Even should they not, Fong has no ships, and is unlikely to seize any soon. We will retreat to *Suzuran*, and let those of Earth among us teach us how to wait. We will win this, Zuko. So long as we do not lose heart."

So long as Asagitatsu's fires keep burning, and the drowned don't come back to throttle us all. Though Zuko kept that morbid thought to himself. Uncle saw spirits, but apparently that wasn't the same as getting drafted into sorting out their disputes with humans. The closer Fong got, the more the caldera felt... off. As if even the wind that fanned Asagitatsu's flames was fragile, unreal as the paper streamers actors used to play bending. "I should check on the sentries."

"To be sure the battle-line is where you left it this morning?" Iroh chuckled. "Nephew. Your people know their duties. They will not fail."

"Knowing your duty doesn't keep a boulder from landing on your head." One last scowl at the map, and Zuko tucked Teo's letter up his sleeve and headed outside. Nodded at the guards that fell in behind both of them; damn it, that was annoying, he'd looked after his own hide for *years*...

But the people Lieutenant Teruko trusted to be subtle and still keep his skin intact all had more important things to do right now, and nobody was willing to risk him wandering around alone. One of Fong's men just *might* get lucky.

I hate being important.

Even this high above the harbor, the afternoon sun was fierce. Their gardens were growing green with summer's long days; oogami-nuts needed more time to ripen, but if his people had read the soil right, root crops should give them their first harvests soon. Everybody had a place under a roof, everybody had clean water even if they'd had to re-channel a few springs to get it, they'd hammered out a basic set of laws people were willing to live under, there was even talk of a flag...

And now Fong's here. Damn it. We must have wounded at least one in ten of his men. Why won't he stop?

Fanatics. Zuko hated every last one of them.

There's got to be more I can do. There's got to be something I'm missing.

And it was going to be a long slog up to the Chip; damn it, should they rig up more pulleys to get supplies up there faster? Or was the risk not worth it, since it might give Fong's non-bending soldiers their own advantage if Fong managed to take the defenses? As it stood the Chip was half its own defense; rock, yes, but *volcanic* rock, not the sandstone and earth most Earth Army benders trained with. It didn't break the same, and according to Shirong it took a lot more effort to bend it if you had no ties to Fire. Which still wouldn't keep Fong's people from bringing chunks down on their heads-

A waft of fishy smoke wrinkled his nose, and Zuko held his breath a moment as they walked on. Fish made good glue. And he was glad for that, kind of, no matter the stink, because good ink needed glue and even with his people's loyalties, keeping stressed-out people from each other's throats took *so much* ink-

Wait a minute.

"Zuko?"

Unfolding Teo's letter, Zuko moved just out of the range of the smoke. *Fishy breeze... salty... something about a smoke taste...*

Licking a finger, he checked the breeze. *I think - that way.* "We need an earthbender." He met Uncle's gaze, grim. "I think I just found a crack in our wall."

Climbing up out of the slanted pile of boulders that must have once been a cellar wall, Iroh gazed down the slope leading to the Chip, relief mingled with satisfaction as he brushed stone dust from his beard. "I believe this is far more than a crack."

"Absolutely amazing," Tingzhe Wen murmured, studying the sketch he'd made of the contorted tunnels leading through volcano-twisted stone. His socks squished against his sandals; apparently cracks in the tunnels let rain seep in through the earth and stone above, and some of the passages had been knee-deep in water. "How did they build it? *When* did they build it? Did they know they were on top of a time bomb?"

"Don't believe this," Zuko was muttering; black hair gray with daubs of clay slip, wafting away into dust as he paced. "How will we ever seal this up in time... even if we seal it up, Fong's scouts are looking for disturbed earth, they'll find it..."

"Sealing this gift would be premature," Iroh declared.

"Gift?" Zuko sputtered.

"A magnificent gift," Iroh declared, pointing below, toward the shadows along the slope curving away from them, where the Chip opened. "From here, we should have a most excellent view of Fong's army, as it attacks the first wall."

"A view of-" Zuko's good eye narrowed, as he eyed the slope below; obviously gauging distance, elevation, and how hard it would be for even an earthbender to make his way up fragile clay

slopes. "...Huh. That might work."

"The timing will be crucial," Iroh noted. "Too soon, and not enough of Fong's forces will be within our trap." He smiled, stroking his beard. "But if we are wise, and hold our hands until the time is right... I have told you before, nephew. The spirits look after those who keep faith with them."

Zuko shot him an aggravated look... that turned to disbelief, and a heartfelt groan, and his face buried in his hands.

"Nephew?" Iroh frowned.

Mute, Zuko lifted a hand to point up and past him.

Puzzled, Iroh turned. *What in the worlds-*

A white-and-brown shadow, skimming through the sky toward the Northern Air Temple. A very *familiar* shadow.

"Oh dear," Tingzhe murmured. "Surely, that isn't-?"

"Tell me something else it could be. *Anything* else." Zuko still had one hand over his face, as if to blot out painful reality. "Uncle. You asked the spirits for help again. Didn't you."

Iroh grinned, amused despite himself at what Aang would soon find. "Ah. Well-

"Stop doing that!"

Chapter End Notes

First, a confession: I had to do a lot more research to get this chapter done than I anticipated, and it took a lot more time and yanking of hair than I ever imagined to write it, because when I set out to write this arc of the story it *never occurred to me* that I was setting up a siege for the characters.

...Go ahead and laugh. It is funny.

Some interesting books for further background include:

Fire & Stone by Christopher Duffy, on siege warfare.

The Mongol Invasions of Japan, 1274 and 1281, by Stephen Turnbull.

The Mongol Art of War, by Timothy May.

The Culture of Civil War in Kyoto, by Mary Elizabeth Berry.

1493 by Charles C. Mann; the whole "silver and silk" trade has some stark observations on what people are willing to do to each other when they feel threatened by other groups - physically or monetarily.

I've probably also borrowed a few ideas from Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.
Heh.

Yes, the Avatar's exempt from consequences from breaking with his element. Gyate has no way to know that, though; she's not part of the White Lotus.

About Shih expounding on Zuko at the Western Temple... check canon. Zuko was there. That is where he made his decision to find the Avatar. Anyone in earshot, much less a spirit, would have overheard it. It's a pretty short jump from there to deciding, hey, if I want to get an idea across to the Avatar, I know he's met this guy...

When it comes to taking this long to get things through Aang's head... he's a twelve year old boy who was raised in a very safe and fairly loving environment. People who are raised like that tend to freeze when confronted with evil, or with difficult choices. And they tend to deny a horrible reality as long as possible. That's just human nature. Zuko was raised in a much more vicious environment, where actions had painful and often deadly consequences. And he's older. So after much painful falling on his face, he's learned to take reality as it comes, no matter how much he doesn't want to. That is also human nature.

People with different life experiences, temperaments, and information make different decisions. That is life. And the guy who was raised in peace, tossed into the middle of a war, is not going to have a very easy time figuring out what's going on or what he should do without a lot of mistakes.

On top of that, nobody listens well when they're being told off. It's psychological self-defense. Just like Katara is never going to listen to a 'Not So Different' speech from the person she sees as the villain!

Chapter 71

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Toph held out her hands to feel the fading sunlight, toes scrunching up at the courtyard's chill stone. At least all the rock meant she could feel where the courtyard was. And wasn't. The rest of the world was one big black hole of empty air, nudging and shoving at every little crack in the mountain. And there were lots of cracks.

How can air that's so thin push so hard?

She'd flown on Appa lots of times, but they'd never gone this high. Breathing didn't feel right. She breathed in and breathed out, but there just didn't seem to be enough air. It made her head hurt.

On top of all that, they were up here, surrounded by gliders and pushy wind, instead of down on a nice big lump of rock with Zuko. Even relying on what everybody else was telling her rather than her own two feet, it was obvious Sparky was in trouble up to his eyebrows. Again.

"At least they didn't land to help the other guys," Toph muttered, straining her ears to figure out where Boots might have gotten to this time. Haru and even the Duke had been all for landing on the Earth Army side, getting Aang to flatten whoever they wanted flattened, and sorting out who was right later. After all, Earth had to be the good guys, right?

Toph had to smirk, remembering the yelling that had followed that little remark. The bad words tossed around as Katara and Sokka practically fell over each other to say General Fong was *not* one of the good guys had almost scared Momo straight off of Appa.

Aang not saying much either way, though - that wasn't funny. She could feel a little vibration through the wood of Appa's saddle when Aang sat with them, but it wasn't anything like what she read through earth. All she knew for sure was that Aang did not want to talk about Fong, or what Fong wanted with the Avatar State, or what he'd done to Katara to try and get it. He wasn't stopping Sokka and Katara from bad-mouthing the guy up one side and down the other, but he wasn't *agreeing* with them either.

Which meant... well, she wasn't sure what it meant, but Toph had a bad feeling it *might* mean he thought Fong had had a point.

You don't know that, Toph reminded herself, trying to root herself in the mountain when the whole temple felt frayed by wind and gas. *All you know, is that he said he went spirit-walking to talk to Avatar Yangchen. To ask her what her Air Nomads used to be like.*

And man, if she could only have been a spider-fly to listen in on *that* conversation. What had Air Nomads *really* been like, a thousand years ago? Like Gyatso? Like Ty Lee? Like somebody else entirely?

Given that Aang wasn't talking about it, she was guessing... *not* like Gyatso.

"I need to find a firebending teacher."

That was one of the few things Aang had admitted Yangchen had said. It hadn't made Katara happy. But given how the eclipse had panned out - yeah. They were kind of low on options.

So when Sokka had asked Toph if she had any idea where Iroh might be... okay, sure. She did.

So why aren't we down there with him? We're not going to find any firebenders up here!

Teo had been pretty clear on that; after the Temple had told Zuko thanks, but this wasn't *their* fight, none of the firebenders had come back up the mountain. They were kind of busy.

Funny thing was, up until a few days ago, one of Zuko's waterbenders - and ooo, the way Katara had sputtered when *that* came up - had still been visiting. To teach the gliders *airbending*.

Katara had made a funny *gurk* sound when Teo said that. Sokka had dropped his boomerang; lucky for him, missing everyone's toes. And Aang...

Aang had been *very quiet*.

Normally, Sokka and Katara wouldn't have missed that. But Haru and the Duke had made enough stammering, surprised noises to keep Teo and everyone else distracted. Who could blame them? After a hundred years, airbending was loose in the world again. Aang wasn't alone anymore. And *of course* it was a waterbender who'd helped Teo's people out, Katara was telling everyone in earshot how much water and air had in common...

Pacing near the edge of the wall, Toph stuck her tongue out at the abyss of air, toes tugging at courtyard stone when the wind gusted again. *If water and air have that much in common, how come Langxue's down there fighting instead of up here thinking about it?*

Aang didn't seem surprised that Langxue wasn't here. But he wasn't talking. He wasn't talking about much of anything since Yangchen had paid him a visit. And that was just not right. Which was why she was out here getting chilly instead of inside tossing rocks around. Not that she thought tossing rocks around was a good idea up here, that natural gas Sokka had told her about was the kind of thing that made all the hairs on the back of your neck go *eep*, but... she really, really needed to think. Because something was wrong. And it moved like a too-quiet airbender.

Like it or hate it, Aang was supposed to be a skinny, bouncy ball of optimism talking a mile a minute about the way things were going to go right. Yet ever since Azula had thumped him-

"Uh-uh," Toph muttered to herself, slowing down as she thought it over. "He was still pretty upbeat even after that. Wasn't 'til we got to the Western Temple that he got all... broody."

So, after the invasion. But before Yangchen. Maybe.

Toph crossed her arms, and stomped her feet to warm up. "But here he is with more airbenders, and he's still broody. Doesn't make sense. The Mechanist got away, so it's not like Aang feels all guilty about Teo's Dad..."

Except maybe he did. Kind of. The airbenders Aang knew didn't *have* Dads. Teo did. That had to be confusing. No wonder Aang had been too stunned to react when Teo and Sima and the others had talked about Langxue airbending-

Wait a minute.

"You mean, showing you the moves," Katara had said, in the middle of that first rush of excited glider-babble.

"Yeah, I guess." Teo had scratched the back of his head; Toph could feel the vibration shiver down to his chair wheels. "He's working off the scrolls like the rest of us. But he knows how scrolls

break down water forms, and that helps."

It was hard to read Teo's feelings, trembling to her from wheels on stone instead of feet. But the other gliders were easy to read, even if they were almost as light on their feet as Hitomi. They shifted the same way she did, when she *was* telling the truth...

Just, not all of it.

And Aang had - huh. She'd thought he hadn't reacted, because Twinkletoes had a pretty easy to read surprised flinch that often ended up with him flying into the air with a yelp. And he hadn't.

"He just kind of... leaned, back and forward," Toph muttered to herself, matching the movement in her own stance. It felt weird; like taking a blow you couldn't block-

Toph sucked in a breath, and scowled at how thin it was. "That's it. He got hit with something he didn't like, but he knew it was coming."

But what? The fact that Teo and a few others were airbenders? The hint that Langxue might bend water *and* air?

"Nah," Toph decided. Shidan had said something about Zuko being a yāorén, whatever that meant, which meant there might be more, but... "Tao told Aang nobody could do it. And he believed the guy. I felt Sparky do it, and I still have trouble believing it-"

Thumping leather slammed into her shins, driving her back.

Boots? What the-

Her hand slapped cobblestones as one foot slipped, and Toph blanched. Oh man, the edge was *right there-!*

"Back up," Toph muttered to herself, Boots a not-quite-solid pair of pressures holding her away from the edge as she felt her way back to solid mountain stone. "Back up, stay on the rocks, back up..."

"There you are!"

Changchang stomped across the courtyard, breathing just a little fast. "I asked your friends where you were," the matronly aunt said briskly. "They said you'd be fine, but I've had a few near-misses when I've been distracted. Ji's done his best to remodel, but this place just wasn't built for people who can't fly... are you all right?"

"I'm *fī-*"

Which would have sounded better if the wind hadn't tickled her dry throat, half-choking her with a cough.

"Fine," Toph insisted, dusting off her hands as she got to her feet. "No wonder Twinkletoes can't think about anything for three minutes straight, can't think when you can't breathe... I can look after myself..."

Changchang rocked back on her heels, obviously not convinced. "You're having trouble with the air? How often have you been up this high?"

"Try never?" Toph grumped. "I don't like it up here! Even the earth doesn't feel right- what?"

"Come with me, young lady," Changchang directed, holding out a hand. "I need to give your young friend a piece of my mind. There's a reason we still have relatives in the lowlands."

"We call it mountain sickness," Changchang said, matter-of-fact as Gran-Gran diagnosing frostbite.

"But you can fix it, right?" Aang was almost bouncing in place in Changchang's sickroom doorway, which Katara knew wasn't good... but on the other hand, he was actually *moving*. And worried about somebody here and now, instead of how badly the invasion had gone wrong. It was kind of a relief.

Hands gloved in healing water, she ignored Sokka leaning against the wall, the creak of wheels on the floor, and the rustle as Haru turned pages, and tried to push at the sense of *not right* in Toph's lungs and blood. "It's like shoring up a sand castle," Katara admitted, frustrated. "I can make it better for a while, but I can't stop it." She shook her head. *I'm supposed to be a healer. If I just had more training!*

"All that really helps is getting back down to the lowlands." Teo rocked his wheels back and forth, obviously upset. "I'm sorry, Toph. I should have remembered... you're a really strong earthbender. But you came here with Aang, and we all know he flies."

"So earthbenders can't stay up here?" Leafing through Changchang's extensive herb-healing notes, Haru glanced up, alarmed.

"Earthbending has nothing to do with it," Changchang said firmly. "True, most of our earthbenders didn't stay in the Temple. But mountain sickness isn't that choosy. Earthbender, glider, not a bender at all - I've seen all of them struck down." She drew a breath, and scowled. "Most people who got ill from thin air didn't stay up here; even a little bit of dizziness is a risk at these heights. If Toph is this dizzy, this fast... you need to take her down. Before she gets any worse."

"Hello, sitting right here," Toph grumped, huddled in an extra blanket on a bench. "What do you mean, worse?"

Changchang winced. "Young lady..."

"Give it to her right between the eyes," Sokka cut in. "Trust me. She likes it better that way."

Toph pumped a fist. "You better believe it."

Changchang and Teo exchanged a look. Teo grimaced. "If Auntie thinks it's bad - you *need* to get down. Or in a few days," he hesitated. "It'd be bad."

"Down or things get nasty. Got it."

"I'm sorry," Aang started, looking sicker than Toph did. "You didn't have any problems at the Western Temple-"

"There might be a good reason for that." Teo was a little pink. "Didn't the scrolls say something about... um, women's stuff..."

"The nuns' temples were built lower, for the safety of women with child," Changchang said bluntly. "We found that out the hard way up here. If the air's too thin, both mother and child suffer."

Katara let water run off her hands into a bowl. "Even airbenders?" That was scary.

"Yangchen... said not everybody was born an airbender," Aang admitted.

Her jaw dropped; Katara tried to glance away before Aang noticed. Sure, she and Sokka had tossed around the idea that not everybody in the Air Nomads might have been a bender. In any bunch of people, somebody had to be a little less spiritual. But she'd never thought Aang would believe it. "She said that?" Katara managed. "What else did she say?"

Aang swallowed, and looked at the floor. "That I couldn't stop the war if I didn't understand why people were fighting."

"Good luck with that." Teo leaned back in his chair, shaking his head. "We know why General Fong's going after Dragons' Wings. What we don't know is how to get him to *stop*. If he won't believe the Earth King's own seal... well, who else can order him to go home?"

Sokka frowned, like he was trying to figure out one of his own drawings a month later. "How'd Kuei's seal get into the middle of this?"

"Oh, man." Teo sighed, glancing up at the ceiling. "Is that a long story."

Toph grimaced, and rubbed her head.

"I'll try to keep it short," Teo added hastily. "First thing you need to know is, *don't earthbend*. Not without asking first. Asagitatsu is a barrel of blasting jelly waiting to go off, and Zuko's people can only poke holes so fast."

"Asagitatsu?" Sokka muttered, so low Katara almost didn't hear him. "Oh, man. Go figure. How does Prince Cranky find these things?"

"Second, don't go in the water," Teo went on. "The fires are keeping the drowned down, and General Iroh's been running memorial services for the ghosts, but..." He swallowed. "Zuko warned us, if the fires go out, don't go down there. There's just too many drowned."

Drowned. Katara felt like she'd been buried in ice. *But even if a whole ship went down, there couldn't be enough sailors mad at the Ocean to make that many drowned-*

Oh. Oh, spirits.

"Drowned?" Aang frowned. "You sound like that's a thing. Not something bad that happened to somebody."

Changchang heaved a sigh. "They were something bad that happened, Avatar Aang. The problem is, their spirits don't accept that and rest. Which means when they find other living humans-

"Don't," Katara blurted out. "We'll tell him. On the way down." *I don't want to. But if we have to tell him... not here. Not where there are finally airbenders to be Aang's family.*

"Katara?"

She shook her head, determined. "Later."

"It's not good," Sokka put in. "But if they've got memorial flames burning... yeah. That should work. Eventually."

Toph tilted her head Sokka's way. "And how good does it work if Fong stomps them?"

"That'd be the tricky part," Sokka admitted. "Aang-"

Aang nodded, determined. "We need to stop the fighting."

"Yeah," Sokka agreed. "In the long run. In the short run-"

"I have to do this!" Aang insisted. "I'm the Avatar. If I can't stop the war here, where the Fire Nation doesn't want to fight, how can I stop it anywhere?"

Sokka shrugged. "You kind of have a point, but-"

"Kind of?"

"Aang." Sokka took a deep breath. "Nobody can eat a shipload of sea prunes in one meal. Yeah, we want to stop the fighting. But first? Why don't we see if there's a way we can keep both sides from going after each other long enough to cool down." He stepped forward, resting a friendly hand on Aang's shoulder. "You're a good guy, and if anybody can tell them not to fight, you can do it. But first, they have to be able to listen."

"I was raised to believe that all Air Nomads were peaceful. By the will of Subodei, the Air Nomad horde-leader who wished to plunder the world, and by the will of Xiangchen, the fanatic who wished to use war to destroy war.

"Yes, young kinsman. He was as insane as you think. But unlike Ozai's rage, which turns outward to ravage the world, Xiangchen's rage turned inward, toward his own people. He would never be a horde-leader, and he knew it. And you cannot imagine that fury; that envy, Aang. Hate, anger, rage; all of those injure a soul. But envy destroys it.

"Xiangchen hated the horde-leaders, and he envied them. So he sought to create a world in which horde-leaders would be utterly destroyed.

"In a way, he succeeded.

"But he would have done so much worse, if the yāorén had not found me..."

Aang breathed in salty wind as Appa took them down, trying not to think about that look of sadness on Yangchen's face. She'd had friends. Good friends.

Friends, who had dragged her out of her peaceful mountain hideaway, told her she was the Avatar, and forced her to face a war.

Friends who had died in that war, killed by the same volcano they were flying into now.

It doesn't look dangerous from up here.

If he hadn't flown over the Fire Nation caldera, he wouldn't even be able to guess this was a volcano. It looked like a long half-oval of a harbor, opening northwest to the sea, with an island almost in the middle of it, hot air rising from the east side of the cone in a steady, almost invisible shimmer.

The first clue it wasn't just a harbor, Aang thought, was what wasn't there. No houses on the island. None. Not even any boats.

The second... was the fires. Fires *everywhere*.

"Kind of like the fire fountains back in the islands." Sokka was half-out of the saddle, clinging to Appa's neck to get into easy speaking range. "So that's what you can do with natural gas and some

time on your hands. Huh." He glanced east, over Appa's shoulder, and his voice soured. "And that's what happens when you take a bunch of angry earthbenders over enemy territory. Great."

Aang glanced that way, trying not to wince. You could see the brown and gray ruin where Fong's army had passed, leading over the lower spots on the wrinkle of mountains. Like he'd taken a massive rake and ripped the ground to shreds, wherever his army had walked.

Given the Fire Nation traps Teo had told them about... Aang wasn't sure he could blame them.

"Looks like he's still a few miles from the Chip," Sokka observed. "Good. If he's got any sense, he's going to stop right there. No way is he going to want to troops to walk into traps in the dark." Sokka frowned. "Then again, this is Fong."

"That's not fair," Aang got out, aching inside. "He's trying to save the Earth Kingdom."

"Right," Sokka said wryly. "Destroying it so he can save it. Makes perfect sense."

"Guru Pathik says we're all one." Aang rubbed reins between his fingers, glad to hang onto something familiar. "How is what Fong's doing any different from what we did?"

"What? You seriously think that - argh." Sokka rubbed his knuckles against his forehead.

"Someday, I've got to talk to this guy... Aang. Did you hear what Teo said about the people Fong's using to spring traps? We didn't do that to anybody. Everybody who came on the invasion wanted to be there."

"So how do we know they didn't?" Aang said defensively. Because if Fong was doing that to people who didn't *want* to help... that was just too awful. And they could always run away, right?

"You can be... really scared, and still do what you said you would do. Teo's never talked to those people. How do we know they're not doing what they promised they'd do?" Aang looked back out over the caldera, taking in the shaped stone, sunset glinting off streams, and dark green patches of gardens. "How do we know *Zuko didn't* start the fight? Remember the Zhangs and the Gan Jins?"

"Kind of hard to forget guys who scream like little girls just because they're up against great big spider-nasty canyon crawlers," Sokka said wryly.

"Yeah." Aang grinned a little. "But those tribes - they'd been fighting so long they didn't even know *why* any more. They just thought they did. The Fire Nation's been attacking the Earth Kingdom since before Azulon was born, and who knows how long General Fong's been fighting them, and-" He spread his hands, shrugging in the wind. "We *know* Zuko. Even if he's trying to be nice - and okay, maybe he *was* - he's *scary*."

"Point," Sokka admitted. "Guy definitely takes after his granddad." The Water Tribe warrior blinked. "And... when I think about his *other* granddad, maybe that's not so bad."

Huh? That didn't make any sense, Zuko's other granddad would at least be human-

Except... Zuko's other granddad was *Azulon*.

Um. Maybe Sokka had a point.

"You heard what Teo told us," Aang went on, trying not to think about that too hard. How could other people live with parents being so important, when they meant you had to admit you were connected to people whose teachings were so *wrong*? "Zuko ran into Fong's people before Teo had a chance to really watch them. Maybe Teo thinks he didn't start it, but Teo doesn't know when people are lying to him. The Mechanist lied to him for years!"

"And how'd he pull that off?" Sokka sounded curious. "Teo's an airbender. Don't you all know when people lie?"

"Well, *I* do," Aang grumbled. "Just like Toph does, and Master Gyatso, and all the Elders-"

"You mean it's more of a master bender thing."

"...I guess." Aang scowled at the earth-bowl below, taking in the ring of marsh-patches spreading around the outside rim of the caldera wall. Maybe some of that was natural, but he'd seen newly flooded lands before. Zuko's people might not be hurting the earth as much as Fong was, but they were changing things. Who gave them the right? "That's why we've got to talk to them first. I need to hear what Zuko thinks he's doing."

"Aang?" Sokka gave him a level look, only slightly thrown off by blinking away a passing dragonfly. "Don't take this the wrong way, buddy. But right now, you're lying. To yourself."

Aang rocked back against fur. "I don't-"

"If you really thought both sides were just as wrong, we'd be heading to talk to the Earth Army, first."

"They are wrong," Aang shot back. "If Zuko's really not working for the Fire Lord anymore, there shouldn't be a fight."

"*You* didn't want to fight Fong," Sokka pointed out.

"And I *didn't*," Aang insisted. "When he sank Katara into the ground..." He swallowed, hard. "That wasn't me anymore. You know that!"

"Yeah, I know," Sokka sighed. "Avatar Spirit. Not you."

Aang blinked away dust, relieved. "Right-"

"Thing is," Sokka cut across his words, "Zuko doesn't have an Avatar Spirit to save his butt. Or his friends' butts." Blue eyes were hard, and a little scary. "We need to think about that when we look at what he's doing. And why."

"So why does he get into messes where he *needs* an Avatar?" Aang grumbled.

"We don't know he started this fight-"

"I *know* that, Sokka. Just listen," Aang insisted. "We don't know if Zuko started a fight *with General Fong*. But he brought Fire Nation people up here, on Earth Kingdom land, and he put them right under an Air Temple. He's the Fire Lord's son. He *knows* about war, right? He had to know he was going to start a fight with *somebody*. So why did he do it?"

"...Let's ask him."

Right. Like it was going to be that easy.

They landed near the docks. And that made Aang tense up all over again, because one of those docks looked like it came straight from Ba Sing Se, and another looked like the ones near Shu Jing, and the one in the middle didn't look like either of them. Any one of them would have been okay. All three of them together was just *wrong*.

The familiar battered Fire Navy ship hanging out in deeper water was just the frosting on the air-

whipped cake.

They touched down, and Toph was off onto solid ground before he could jump from Appa's head. "Whoa!" She scrunched her toes in the odd, dark dirt. "Teo's right, guys. We don't want to grab hunks of this unless we have to. It kind of... fizzes. Like dropping water in Katara's cook-pot."

"You want to do the cooking next time?" Katara teased, getting down with a pat to Appa's side. "That's weird. Where is everybody?"

"Usually, Appa gets a crowd," Sokka filled Haru in. The Duke had decided to stay up with the gliders, which the little tree-dweller declared as *awesome*. "People go *ooo* and *ah* and *are you really the Avatar*-"

"In case you missed the flyers, Sokka, everybody here knows that already."

"Huojin?" Aang blinked at the unhappy Ba Sing Se guardsman, peering past him to catch glimpses of other people hanging back around corners and behind buildings. "What are you doing here? And why is everybody acting scared?"

Huojin's brows went up. "You have to ask? First of all, there was no chance on earth I was going to raise my daughters in grabbing distance of Azula. Second of all - how the *hell* did you miss the *army coming to kill us*?"

"I don't care what General Fong wants to do. He's not going to kill *anybody*," Aang said firmly. "And you're not answering me. Why are people acting like they're scared of *us*? Fong's not our friend-"

"Neither was Azula," Huojin said dryly.

Aang gaped, open-mouthed. That was - there were no *words* to describe how wrong that was, Sokka hadn't *meant* to let Azula in-

Huojin wasn't even looking at him, head craned back to look at the mountains that hid the Northern Temple from view. "The Mechanist's people warned you not to earthbend down here, right? Asagitatsu's touchy..." Something caught his eye, and the guard straightened, relieved. "And here comes the general. Good."

Aang had to take a second look. That was Iroh heading their way, with Amaya and a few others in green and red behind him. But the old firebender had lost a lot of weight. "What's going on here?"

About to speak, Iroh paused, and stroked his beard instead. "A valid question, Avatar Aang. But first... you and your friends may wish to return to the Air Temple, quickly. General Fong will soon be knocking at our door, and he does not intend a friendly visit."

"How do you know that?" Aang insisted.

"Um. Army?" Toph grumbled. "Kind of hard to miss. You heard what Teo said about the people Fong's throwing into traps."

"But we don't know he's throwing them in." Aang didn't look away from Iroh. "They could have promised to do that-"

"You may ask the survivors for yourself," Iroh said dryly. "I assure you, they made no promises to be Fong's boulder fodder."

"Easy for you to say," Katara shot back. "You're the one setting the traps!"

"Katara, just - wait, okay?" Aang kept staring at Iroh. "If they didn't want to be there, why didn't they just run away?"

Amaya gave him a look up and down, and raised a brow. "What makes you think they didn't try?"

"They were still *there*?"

The healer shook her head. "...You've never tried to run from an earthbender, have you?"

"That some of them are with us, should tell you they did run," Iroh stated. "We have left Fong word of who we are and why we are here, and we have given him copies of our treaty with Earth King Kuei. He has had many chances to withdraw bloodlessly, and we have told him if he retreats, we will not pursue him. But if he breaches our walls, we will destroy him. We have no choice."

Aang felt his face flush red. "There's always a choice."

"If we leave Asagitatsu, she will erupt." Iroh's voice was iron. "If she does, it will destroy countless lives. More, perhaps, than the Fire Nation has ever slain in all these years of war. The Face-Stealer wishes this to happen, to slay entire peoples, and we cannot allow it. We must stand against evil. We *must* try to mend what the war has marred. That is why Dragons' Wings is here. That is why we will stand against General Fong, no matter the cost." He drew a deep breath. "We have asked him to leave, Aang. What would you do?"

Aang was *not* going to roll his eyes. "You could try talking?"

"Yeah," Sokka said wryly. "Because that worked so well for us."

"It is a valid idea, Sokka. Unfortunately, it has not worked." Iroh sighed. "General Fong has ignored every request for parley we have made. When we have been able to observe his army, he has quite publically ripped the messages to shreds." Iroh raised a bushy brow. "Do you have any other suggestions?"

"If messages don't work, why not send a person?" Aang argued. "People are a *lot* harder to ignore."

"And yet I know someone who manages," Sokka muttered.

Iroh was giving Aang a look that reminded him oddly of when Gyatso had caught him up an apple tree when he was *supposed* to be cleaning between Appa's toes. "Young man. The rules of parley were created for a reason. What one does to the message, is a mark of what one *intends* to do to the *messenger*. We know Fong's reputation well enough that Zuko will not risk any of our people in his hands. I know those who have sent messengers to Fong. When you have found the body of a man buried while still alive..." He cut himself off, looking away. "And those were the ones we found and gave honorable fires to. Shall I tell you of the others?"

"Iroh." Amaya rested a comforting hand on his shoulder. "It's in the past. Leave it there. We won't let it happen again." She cast a glance at Aang. "And I think he gets the point."

"If he doesn't, I can tell him," Huojin spoke up. "I've gone drinking with a lot of veterans off the Wall, and some of them used to fight in the armies outside Ba Sing Se. The stories they told about Fong... If I even started most of them, Luli would kick me out of bed for a week for giving the girls nightmares. And I'd deserve it."

Aang tried not to swallow too obviously. Sokka *did* have nightmares about what had happened to

Katara. But... Fong had only been doing that because he wanted the war *stopped*. No matter what it took. Right? "But if you know Fong - you *knew* he'd protect the Earth Kingdom. I wouldn't have come up here in the first place!"

"But we are here," Iroh said firmly, "and here we must remain. As we have told Teo and his kin, Asagitatsu is a water volcano. She must have a firebending line to calm her."

"But you can't be here," Aang insisted. "This is the *Earth Kingdom*-"

"By the word of the Earth King, it is not," Iroh declared. "And in the past, it was not. This land belonged first to the dragon clan of Ryuuko-hime, who dwelled here, and only after that did part of it fall under the use of the Air Nomads. Asagitatsu herself has bid us try to calm her, to hold off disaster." Iroh gave him a level look. "I have always tried to respect the spirits."

"But if you stay here, Fong's going to keep attacking you," Aang pointed out. "You don't have to stay. I'll talk to Asagitatsu-"

"As much as I appreciate the offer, Asagitatsu is not angry, nor confused, nor truly desirous of harming humans," Iroh cut him off. "Asagitatsu is a volcano. She must erupt. She has already been waiting a century too long." He grinned at Aang "How long can you hold back a sneeze?"

Um. Well. "But Roku fought volcanoes to keep them from erupting!" Aang protested. "I saw it!"

"You saw Roku fight other volcanoes?" Katara gave him a worried look, fingers gripping her waterskin. "You only told us about the one on Roku's island."

"Well, yeah, that's the only one I saw," Aang admitted. "But he was showing me the important stuff in his life. If that's what he did, then that's what an Avatar's supposed to do, right?"

For a long moment, Iroh was silent. Took a deep breath, and heaved a weary sigh. "Avatar Aang. If you ever intend to learn firebending, you should know this. Fire is the life of the world, and every volcano is a beating heart. Would you stop Asagitatsu's heart?"

Aang froze. That was - was he saying that stopping the volcano would *kill* a spirit? But - Roku had-
Roku didn't stop the volcano, Aang reluctantly recalled. *He just... slowed it down a little.*

So what should he *do*?

Toph cleared her throat. "You're stalling, Uncle." She cracked her knuckles. "Where's Sparky?"

Sunset. Zuko could feel the flames burning lower inside; a chill echoed by the damp breeze seeping up from the rock passage below. Firebenders could fight at night, just as waterbenders could by day, but none of them *wanted* to. Which the man heading this way was undoubtedly counting on.

"I used to do most of my work at night," Shirong mused, looking up at the war balloon tethered to give the Chip a good lookout, then out into the deepening shadows in the rocky pass below them. "I'm not looking forward to this."

For more reasons than one, Zuko knew. "You're a yāorén. You're responsible to the spirits, not just me. You don't have to do this-"

"Prince Zuko," Agent Shirong said formally. "You have signed a treaty with Earth King Kuei. That

is *binding*. As a Dai Li, part of my duty is to uphold the law, to foster virtuous acts and maintain peaceful and honorable alliances with the spirits. By attacking Dragons' Wings, General Fong is acting against the expressed will of the Earth King. Even as a yāorén - *especially* as a yāorén - it is my duty to stop him."

Zuko inclined his head, accepting the rebuke. "Sometimes, duty hurts." He glanced toward Saoluan and Langxue. "If you're going to fight, stay up here."

The waterbender bristled, white lock of hair almost red in the gloom. "I'm old enough-"

"I was fighting pirates at your age. I *know*." Zuko held his gaze. "When it comes to blades, you're better than half the reserves backing the Chip. But you'll do the most good *up here*. Where you can move the fire ice where we need it." He paused, deliberately. "And where you'll have the wind. If everything goes wrong, we might all need that."

"...I guess," Langxue admitted, not quite nestling into Saoluan's comforting hand on his shoulder. Smirked a little, and glanced past Zuko, to Lieutenant Teruko. "At least I'm not the only one with a babysitter."

Saoluan whistled, not at all innocent.

Zuko tried not to redden. "Lieutenant. I told you-"

"Yes, sir, you did." Teruko didn't budge. "Lieutenant Sadao and Sergeant Kyo have things well in hand, sir. Even so, I would *like* to be with them. But you take after both your grandfathers. I gather you didn't get too many stories about Shidan growing up, but I know you've read the military histories of Fire Lord Azulon. You said you'd stay off the battlefield, and I know you meant it. None of which changes the fact that when your people are dying, your first reaction is going to be *kill the bastards*. And you'll do your damndest to carry it out. *Personally*."

She was probably right. Damn it.

"We don't even know if Fong's coming," Shirong pointed out. "The bison's not hard to miss; he has to know Avatar Aang is in our territory. And *not* attacking us. He may think twice-"

Fire flared overhead; three controlled, small bursts from the war balloon.

Enemy in sight.

Zuko took a deep breath, and blew out steam. *I hate being right*. "...Here we go."

Chapter End Notes

Altitude sickness can be nasty. Ascending the way the Gaang does in canon at the Southern and Northern Air Temples - straight up thousands of feet with no time to stop and rest on the way - is just asking for it. I'll leave out the grisly biological details, but this one dovetails kind of neatly into the Avatar world in canon. Long story short, human pregnancy runs right up against the edge of the body's metabolic limits. If a pregnant woman can't get enough oxygen to breathe, she can't burn enough calories to support the baby's growth and health. This can lead to low birth weight, premature birth, and a bunch of other related unpleasantness.

Which is why it's very, very interesting that the Western and Eastern Temples are at significantly lower altitudes. Sure, they're above sea level. But it's more along the lines of a few hundred, or at most a few thousand feet above sea level; well below what's medically referred to as high altitude (about 4,900 to 11,500 feet). Given the Air Nomads in canon don't spend all of their lives above the treeline, but instead bounce up and down a lot, this is exactly what you'd want for safe pregnancy and delivery. That's kind of cool.

What's also interesting is that in a way, altitude sickness is like the Wendigo. There are physiological limits to human adaptation, and people who break them pay the price. Sometimes fatally.

Chapter 72

Chapter Notes

Warning, this one took a while to write because I was trying to show how brutal war is, without being too graphic. So what's in this chapter - well, it's not pretty. Some of my inspiration came from reading about the Attack on Mers-el-Kébir (British on French fleet) in World War II. Check it out on Wikipedia. Whoof.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Zuko clenched his fingers to stop fire ice that wanted to melt, holding it solid. Nights weren't ever really hot in the mountains, but the winds had turned off the sea, bringing in an overcast that hugged some of the day's heat close. And - it was summer. Fire's season.

Here they come.

Fong's first sally at the wall was more a testing probe than an attack; hapless conscripts prodded forward to unravel a riddle or die.

No riddle this time.

Just death, scything out through darkening air. Bodies fell.

Zuko rubbed sweating palms on a bit of rag. He was in armor again, even if it was mostly bits and pieces borrowed from other marines. Lt. Teruko had insisted.

Not expendable.

He was really beginning to hate those words.

Movement below again. More of Fong's scouts, picking their way through areas where the dead should have already sprung the traps.

Well, yes. And - no.

There weren't any more traps down there. As Fong's scouts realized, when they got almost to the base of the wall, and reached to bend rock away from logs to clear the way-

Red-fledged arrows flew. There were screams.

But Fong had known the Yu Yan would be after his benders. Survivors fell back, some of them raising a mound of earth as a ramp. Troops surged up to crest the wall, aiming to take what had to be just another flimsy barricade-

Except it wasn't.

Behind muck, logs, and steel was another wall, broad and strong enough to stand on. Broad enough to use a spear.

You missed the trap, Fong.

This time, we fight.

If I live through this, Dad's going to kill me, Min thought, gripping the wall a little harder. Lifting one hand to shake it, just a little, as his sweaty palms mixed some of the rock to slippery mud.

He wasn't on the wall. His dad would have killed him for that, for sure. Tingzhe Wen had already lost a brother and too many cousins to count on Ba Sing Se's Outer Wall. That was one of the reasons his father hadn't objected more to his dreams of serving in the Dai Li. Whatever else they did, the Dai Li were *specialists*. Earthbenders trained for finesse, not raw rock-throwing power. They might raid outside the Wall, but always with a specific goal in mind, disappearing into tunnels where the Fire Nation couldn't follow. They definitely did *not* stand on pale stone in plain view to get their heads seared off by a tarball.

So he wasn't gripping a bloody spear, holding off the roaring charge. Instead, he was clinging to a rock wall in a niche he'd dug for a quiet trio of gold-eyed archers, listening to the rough, volcanic stone. Feeling how it stretched and sighed with Asagitatsu's shifting magma deep below...

Twitching, like amber shocking silk, when part of that stone moved against the mountain's will. "There!"

Red and black face-paint narrowed, and a shaft thrummed into the night.

Under Min's fingers, the pass wall stilled. Which meant-

Wiry fingers clamped on his shoulder; *Kojiro*, was the only name or rank the eldest archer had given. "If you have to throw up, do it downwind."

Min swallowed the acid taste in his throat. *Dad's going to kill me.*

It was almost a comforting thought.

I'll be damned, Sergeant Bo thought, hanging back with the supply wagons as more and more men hit the wall... and went nowhere. *Somebody over there finally decided to stand and fight.*

On the one hand, that wasn't surprising. The Fire Nation hated to run. Attack, attack, attack; that was firebending to the core. And the man most likely in charge of the Fire Nation defenses wasn't just the Grand Lotus. He was General Iroh, the Dragon of the West; the one man who'd managed to besiege Ba Sing Se for almost two years, and even breach the Outer Wall. He knew how to hold a siege. He damn well knew how to withstand one.

On the other hand... something just didn't feel right.

Your own people are dying because General Fong won't take orders from Earth King Kuei, and General Iroh's band of renegades would rather fight than surrender, Bo reminded himself. *Nothing about this feels right.*

Still. He wasn't an officer, but he knew something about planning a fight. If only because he was one of the men who ended up shepherding green troops right into the teeth of it. This place was all mountains, dirt and rock everywhere. It ought to be a snap to just roll right over the Fire Nation; either by burrowing their army right under red-armored feet, or smashing the whole pass down on the firebenders in one triumphant landslide.

Ought to be. But it wasn't. The soil around this odd ring of hills was all marsh, slippery clays, and

odd bits of razor-sharp rock. Hard to bend, and impossible to march nonbenders through without turning it into a wagon-eating morass. Like it or not, unless Fong wanted to split his forces, the pass was the best way through. It was rock, after all.

Except it wasn't rock like most of the Western Continent had rock. Bo wasn't a bender any more than he was an officer, but he'd been around enough to hear the difference when someone tried to bend. Sandstone was a *shunk* of sand and slates sliding across each other. The granite and other weird, glassy rocks up here? They fractured. Didn't slide neatly. Broke in odd-sized chunks that the bender wasn't counting on. Worst of all, they *crackled*.

And with every crackle of rock, came a meaty *thunk* of arrows.

Pass isn't coming down that way. Not until they run out of Yu Yan.

Dragons' Wings was a bunch of refugees, no matter what Fong wanted to believe. Sooner or later, they'd run out of Yu Yan. Or arrows. Or both.

And then what?

Bo didn't know. And that bothered him. Sure, with a strong wall and determined fighters, even determined amateurs, they could hold Fong off. For a while. Hours, maybe.

But when it came down to blood and steel, Fong had the numbers. He was *going* to break the wall. And when he did, Dragons' Wings would die. It was that simple.

And after all the losses Fong had taken getting up here... he *might* spare the women and children. Everyone else - no.

Which was why Bo had let Fong take that poor girl Xiu. If she'd lived through the trap, Fong would probably let her keep breathing once he finished smashing the place. And somebody had to stay on Fong's good side, if Bo wanted to spirit General Iroh out of the aftermath, or they were going to be short one Grand Lotus. The Avatar couldn't afford that. Not now.

Wish the general had talked his nephew into being sensible weeks ago, Bo thought regretfully. *They can't win this. All they're going to do is get a lot of good people killed.*

And there came the first trickle of wounded, staggering back to the rear as best they could. Sergeant Bo sighed, and grabbed a camp orderly. "You. Bandages, Hot water. Now."

Stammering, the man scampered off.

Good men maimed and dead on both sides, for a prince's pride. Bo's lip curled in a snarl, and he headed for the first blank-eyed soldier. Everyone knew the Grand Lotus had hopes, but... looked like the prince was his father's son after all. *I hope Fong takes you alive. So you can see it all, before you die.*

Damn it all. Where was the Avatar?

"What do they think they're *doing*?"

High above the fray on Appa, Sokka glanced at Aang, then at the bloody struggle in the dark below. "I'd say Fong thinks he's going to get past this wall and kill people. And Zuko kind of objects to that."

Aang leaped off Appa's head, shoving the reins into Sokka's surprised hands. Stood on the saddle, twisting and turning, trying to see shadows in deeper shadows. "Do you see him?"

"I don't see much of anything," Sokka said impatiently, scrambling up Appa's neck so he could loosen the reins a little. "This is why night battles are *bad*." Temul had fought more than her share of them in a very long life, Fire Lord's peace or not. Making all the great names give loyalty to one Fire Lord hadn't stopped *individual* great names from hating each others' guts. Meaning sooner or later poison, fire, or pointy sharp things came out, usually at the worst possible time. The way the ghost told it, Fire Lord Zouge's lord-loyalty to his vassals had whip-sawed him between spirit-tugs on *every* side of the fight. In the end, it'd killed him.

Which... kind of explained a lot about Sozin.

If someone stuck my dad in a life that killed him by inches, and didn't even care...

Well, first off, he'd do everything he could think of to wiggle out of getting trapped that way himself.

The Painted Lady's town. Those Home Guards in the port.

When it'd come down to lords bleeding for their people, Azula was the one who'd tried to keep the invasion from hitting the city in the first place. Not Ozai.

He's not loyal to his people. Bet it's a family tradition now.

Even if Zuko was jamming tradition in a vice and squeezing, sticking it out down in Dragons' Wings. Putting the rumors and Temul's memories and everything he knew together - Zuko had a habit of doing that.

And he can do it, 'cause he's an exile, Sokka realized. The Fire Lord kicked him out. No loyalty-ties, either way. Zuko, his whole domain - they're not stuck in the Avatar's trap.

An option Sozin hadn't thought of. First, because a Fire Lord couldn't exactly exile himself. And second - he'd probably just been too *ticked off*.

That's what I'd be, if someone trapped Dad like that, Sokka knew. I'd be... really mad.

Really, horribly, *kill-it-a-lot* mad. Mad enough to take on the world. Maybe *literally*.

So if loyalty's not enough to stop the vassals from going at each other, and there's no waterbenders to pull on everybody's hearts and get all the spears pointed in the right way... Nothing like one big threat to make everyone stand together.

Like airbenders whipping up hurricanes that could wipe out islands. Or the Avatar, who could do it by *himself*.

Yeah. Explains a lot about Sozin.

No way was that an excuse for what had happened; to the Temples, to the whole world. *Nothing* was a good enough excuse. But when he poked that idea, and the Fire Nation, and what he'd seen Zuko trying to pull off...

It wasn't an excuse. But spirits, it was a *reason*.

And Aang was still vibrating in place, staring into the night like he could make the clouds pull

back by sheer will, instead of bending. "Maybe if we dropped some lanterns-"

"No," Sokka said firmly. "Night fight. Light equals target. *Bad* idea."

Katara caught Aang's arm, pulling him back into the saddle. "If no one can see anything, how can they keep fighting?"

"Hey, doesn't stop me," Toph pointed out.

"Don't know how many earthbenders can see with their feet," Sokka said wryly. "Doesn't really matter. All Fong has to do is point them at that wall and say go."

Aang was back up bouncing on the saddle edge again. "But they could hit their own people!"

Rock flew. There were screams.

"Somehow," Sokka said dryly, "I don't think Fong cares."

"But why is he doing this? Nobody else has to die!" Grabbing his airstaff, Aang jumped into the air. "I'm going to stop this!"

"Aang!" Sokka yelled. "Wait! That's not going to-"

Green fabric washed gray by the starlight, Aang vanished into the pass.

Oh, hell.

It was simple, Aang thought, swooping through the night. It had to be. Stop the armies, stop the fighting. All he had to do was put a wall in the right place-

Except Teo had said earthbending was a bad idea. Toph had, too. Even Iroh had gently warned him that Asagitatsu was furious after centuries of neglect, and anything but the lightest touch on the earth in the wrong place could set off a spiritual spasm that would be - well, *bad*.

But it couldn't be that bad. Fong's army was earthbending all over the place. And he was the Avatar. He could do this. All he had to do was find where in this channel of shadowy rocks Fong's people were going after Zuko's-

Arrows whistled past, feathers scraping his arrow tattoo. Aang jinked right - except there was kind of a rock wall in the way-

"What are you shooting at?"

Kojiro refrained from rolling his eyes. Teenagers. Not that he'd expect an earthbender to be this jumpy, but first combat was hard on anyone. And Min did have fire in his blood. "A pest."

"We can't shoot Teo's people!"

Kojiro smirked. "Trust me. We're not."

After all, Prince Zuko *had* said to avoid the Avatar if he showed up. And he had. By a gnat's width.

Because orders were orders, but Kojiro was old enough to remember how Lord Kuzon had burned his life out. And why. Byakko had a *long* memory.

Think you're going to mess up a Byakko battle plan, will you, Avatar Aang? Kojiro nocked another arrow, tracking the fluttering glider down. *I think not.*

A puff of breath blasted Aang back from the wall, let him skim down the side of the pass without breaking his airstaff's ribs.

Maybe I should get on the ground. If I can't see anybody...

His feet hit earth, and his stomach lurched. Rock... rock wasn't supposed to *fizzle*, was it? Because this was. Not right under his feet, but... not *that* far down.

Um. Maybe earthbending a wall between these guys wasn't the best idea.

Maybe if I just pulled up shallow earth, it'd be okay. So, I just have to put it between the guys who walk like earthbenders, and the ones who walk like firebenders.

Except, when he'd been training to see with his feet, there hadn't been any firebenders stomping around. And the earthbender he'd trained with was *Toph*.

Nobody here walked like Toph.

He could feel people walking, and running, and fighting. But he couldn't feel who they were.

Okay... okay, keep breathing, think... where's the biggest fight? That's got to be the right spot, right?

Except between the chunks of stone being flung one way, and the arrows and streaks of fire coming the other, and the spears and dao and stuff on both sides - the whole pass felt like one big fight. Where *could* he put a wall that would separate the armies, without leaving some guys trapped on the wrong side?

What do I do now?

Dim red lines glowed in the darkness; embers that had been banked by soil, now uncovered by shovels or earthbenders working with the marines. Zuko sighed, relieved. That bloody light was signal and signpost; retreat *this* way, and help the guy next to you if he missed it.

Lieutenant Teruko thought they couldn't hold the wall anymore. He'd hoped for a few more hours, closer to dawn, but - he trusted her judgment. And Sergeant Kyo's. The gray-haired marine had handled enough green recruits to know how long their band of combat-shocked volunteers could hold together without breaking.

Step one, bloody Fong's nose. Step two, pile them up at the wall as deep as we can. Step three...

Let Fong have the blockade. Teruko's survivors would take the time he needed to grab it, and retreat to a third, lower wall a good bowshot back.

Let them take it. Zuko breathed in and out, aware of Shirong on his left, worrying rock between his fingers; Saoluan and Langxue on his right, the Kyoshi Warrior ready to kill things while Langxue clutched his katana like a tree in a flood. *You ought to know better, Fong. I told you who you were dealing with.*

Six years since an heir of Sozin had gone to war. And Fong hadn't met Azula.

On the battlefield, six years could be a very long time.

You should have studied your history, Fong. I did.

Oh Agni, I don't want to do this...

Hold the ice solid. Just a little longer.

"Aang!" Cupping a hand at her mouth, Katara searched through the darkness. Trying not to see the bloody chaos below. Trying not to imagine Aang in that; he'd blame himself for all of it, when it was two armies' vicious stupidity that had caused everything. "Aang, where are you?"

"He could be anywhere." Sokka swore under his breath. "Toph! If we land, can you find him?"

"Land?" Katara objected, pointing to the bloody pass. "In that?"

"Guys," Toph tried to stick in.

"If we have to? *Yes*," her brother said, grim and fierce as she'd seen him in the invasion, or the Siege of the North. "If we don't find him, one of two things is going to happen. Either somebody who doesn't even know who he *is* is going to take a swing and kill him - or, they take a swing and *don't*. And if they don't? It's going to be Fong and the fortress all over again. Only this time Fong's sitting on top of a freakin' *volcano!*"

"Guys," Toph persisted, a little louder.

Katara couldn't keep from shivering. "Aang... he wouldn't. He's bent near volcanoes before-"

"Not this one, he hasn't!"

"*Guys!*" Toph yelled in Katara's ear. "We don't want to land in the pass! Trust me on this one. Fong's coming through the pass-"

"Yes, he is," Katara said bleakly. "I'm glad you can't see it. Zuko's people are running from the wall, and if they can't hold it anymore..." She winced. The men of her tribe never gave up until they were dead. People from Ba Sing Se wouldn't be that brave, but - they had to know what Fong meant to do to their families. If they were running, they had no hope left.

Toph waved a fist under her nose. "You're not listening!" She pointed out into the night, more or less where rock walls narrowed below them. "Fong *had* to come through the pass. Zuko set it up that way! And if he knew that, he knew he couldn't hold the wall! And *that* means-"

"You think he *meant* Fong to take the wall?" Sokka yelled. "That's crazy! That's..." His voice died, and Sokka tugged the reins right. "Yip yip! Toph, we're going to land on the crest. Get down and find Aang before-" He gulped.

"Before what?" Katara demanded.

Sokka had his eyes closed, as if he were praying. "*Shichi ni sunawachi, tatakae*. Please let me be wrong. *Please*."

Well, Aang thought, swallowing hard as he skimmed his airball up the side of the pass to avoid blood and boulders, *at least I found the wall*.

And Fong. He could hear the general shouting from the top of the blood stone-pile; the same kind of frightening triumph Aang had heard after the Avatar Spirit had almost flattened his fortress. "Onward, brave soldiers of the Earth Kingdom! The night has cost us, but they have no more strength to face us like men." An iron lantern sparked in a soldier's hand; enough light for Aang to see Fong fling out a stabbing finger. "There is their pitiful last bastion, and it will fall in an avalanche's fury! Onward, and cleanse our land of the stain of Fire! Shatter their dwellings; salt the ground they have planted, and let their blood wash it clean! Do not stop while a single intruder breathes! *The Avatar is with us!*"

Blood seemed to freeze in Aang's veins, as he leapt into the air to soar toward armor and insanity. *No. No, I'm not!*

Shadow dancing in the lantern-light, Fong thrust his fists forward.

The earth roared.

Standing on the caldera wall as it shook was like trying to listen in a tornado. Toph snagged some of Appa's fur to make sure she knew which way was up, and tried to center herself in the earth.

Like trying to hold up a rock with jelly.

She could feel the heat burning underground, rock itself burbling thick and sticky as melted sugar. Hot stuff was flowing like syrup around colder, harder chunks of rock, making them melty around the edges. And if it could melt, it could move.

"What's going on?" Katara's hand gripped her shoulder, as the waterbender tried to stand. "Why is Fong bending the earth all the way over here?"

"He's not!" From the sound of it, Sokka was having a little more luck keeping his feet. "This is an earthquake!"

"An earthquake?" Katara's pulse jumped through her skin, even in the midst of chaos. They'd hit a few little tremors in the Fire Nation, but nothing like this. "When does it *stop*?"

"If we're lucky? Before Asagitatsi decides to go up!" Sokka crashed to the ground with a curse, got back up on one knee. "Toph-"

"I can't see Aang in this!" She *had* to yell; her ears were shaking so much, Toph felt like she was getting slugged with a cart-full of stone bells. "I can barely see Appa!"

"Kind of figured. Can you do anything?"

"Are you crazy?" Toph yelled. "This - it's a whole mountain, Sokka!"

"Yeah, so? You flattened half a palace once!" Sokka's knees scraped over the ground; his hand caught her wrist, just above her band of space rock. "You're not Aang. I know that. But maybe if you hold a little of this still he'll see it, and then-"

"And then *what*?" demanded a familiar, unbelievably frustrated voice. "Really. I want to know. Because if you've lost him - in the middle of a battlefield, on an *Avatar-eating volcano* - then right now there isn't anything I can think of that Aang could do to make things worse. Which means obviously, I'm missing something."

"Sparky!" Toph grinned.

"I should have known." From the slosh, Katara had just opened her waterskin. "Just like your sister. Your people are dying down there! And you're up here safe and-"

Iron chains rang through Toph's hearing, binding Katara with a tangling yelp.

"Thank you," Zuko sighed.

"Hmph." An older voice, thick with the accent of Ba Sing Se. "If the little princess thinks any of us are *safe*..." The Dai Li snorted.

More space metal moved; Sokka's sword, drawn and ready. "Let her go!"

"No." Zuko's growl cut straight through the rumble. "Asagitatsu is *this* close to- you know what? I don't have time for this. Saoluan. You talk to them. Sokka *likes* Kyoshi Warriors. Shirong - Toph, Agent Shirong, he knows the rocks here, if you think you can get anything to hold still. Langxue-"

Toph tuned the rest out, trying to figure out how to stop the unstoppable as her teeth rattled together and Shirong hopped and wove his way over shaking ground. Usually, she'd root her stance all the way down to the mountain's heart; standing as the unyielding rock everything else broke against. But now? The earth itself was shivering, like she'd shivered in cold, thin air.

A rock-gloved hand brushed her shoulder. "We're over Asagitatsu's magma chamber," Shirong called out over the rumbles, almost in her ear. "From what the Byakko records tell us, water volcanoes blow when hot magma gets thrown against colder rock and melts all the gas out of it in one blast. We have to stop the mixing!" His breath caught. "If I just knew how. A whole mountain... I've bent earth to trap men and spirits, but this-!"

Toph blinked away flying dust, and smirked. *Yeah. That might work.* "You just think it's too big." She took a breath, and stood. No fists clenched. No fancy-dancey stance. Just heels and toes and muscles taking the shock of ground trying to split under her, and holding her up anyway. "If you can't center in the earth..."

It was as hard as trying to lift Appa one-handed. But at least she could breathe down here. Even if it hurt.

"...Then let the earth... oof... center in *you*!"

Rippling outward, rock stilled.

There's Appa! Heartsick but relieved, Aang soared out of the pass toward pale fur. Maybe he couldn't stop this battle by himself, but Sokka would have an idea. He always did. The earth had quieted down, after all, and that had to be Toph, pulling one of Sokka's crazy plans.

So Appa's easy to see, Aang thought, glad to be back in the air. *Sometimes that's a good thing! Especially in a mess like this, when you can't see anything-*

Weird. Why did he smell cold seawater?

Snap.

Blue and yellow bloomed on the summit, and suddenly Aang could see everything. Fong on the taken wall, head jerked toward the flickering light. The pass full of bloodied Earth Kingdom troops. The smaller wall Aang hadn't realized was almost at the exit of the pass, spearmen and red armor huddled behind it. Wet trickles from lumps of melting blue ice, that had been hidden in the

murk near the top of the pass...

The cold, bleak look on Zuko's scarred face, as he held a handful of fire. And breathed *out*.

The pass exploded in flame.

Night dragged at his bones. Zuko let his eyes close, just for a moment, trying not to smell charred flesh and bone. There wasn't as much of that as he'd expected. The natural gas had scorched and burned, but the real killer had been *air*.

Or rather, lack of air. The fire had swallowed it all.

On open ground, wind would have rushed in to feed the flames. Men would have burned, but those outside the fire would have lived. In the tight channel of the pass...

Lieutenant Teruko cleared her throat. "Sergeant Kyo's bringing him now, sir."

Zuko nodded, forcing himself to concentrate on here and now; the stains and soot of the third wall, where anyone who could wrap a bandage was busy with the survivors.

Almost anyone. I want this to be over. "Get some rest when you can, Lieutenant."

"I will when you do, sir."

"Don't do that," Zuko said dryly. "I need you sane."

The earthbender Sergeant Kyo shoved forward had made an effort to clean off the blood and soot, but no amount of water could wipe the shock off his face.

Good. "Major Yilin," Zuko said coldly. "You appear to be the most senior officer still alive. So I will say this *one more time*. And if you refuse to listen this time..." He let flames dance over his knuckles.

The major swallowed convulsively. "Do what you will to us. The Avatar will never allow the Fire Nation to hold Earth Kingdom land-"

Zuko almost laughed in the man's face. Who knew what the Avatar would do tomorrow, but right now? Aang was huddled up on top of the caldera wall with Appa and his friends; white-faced, singed, and probably agreeing with every horrible name Katara was heaping on firebenders. Seemed that he'd actually been in the air over the pass when the flames had gone up, and that hadn't been fun at *all*.

Can we say howling updraft? Oh yes. Can't airbend when there's no air to bend...

Tomorrow it wouldn't be funny. Right now... maniacal laughter wouldn't get him what he wanted from defeated enemies. Too bad.

"This is not the Earth Kingdom." Zuko held that green gaze. "By treaty with Earth King Kuei, this domain is *mine*." *Breathe. Don't lose it now.* "You can accept that, and treat your wounded, and *leave*. Or you can march into the bay and drown." He smirked. "I should warn you. It's *crowded* down there."

They won.

It felt like a spear through Sergeant Bo's chest, even as he pulled a few last survivors out from under scattered bodies in the dark before dawn, helping them back to the temporary camp on the Fire side of the pass. It *hurt*, deep and tearing in a way he hadn't felt since... never. He'd faced the Dragon of the West before. But not like *this*.

Fire. The pass had been filled with fire, howling like the polar bear-dogs legend said roamed in packs at the North Pole. A horrible, hungry blaze that sucked away air and life like sand through an hourglass. Only no one would bend this back to cheat time.

They lured us in, and they crushed us. Bo swallowed bile as he broke up a fight over barrels of clean water before the two exhausted men involved actually came to blows. Wounded men were always thirsty. *All this time, General Fong thought - hell, we all thought we had them on the run! But...*

The Dragon of the West had just been waiting. Biding his time.

A dark smile flickered over Bo's face as he headed toward the little knot of red standing on the third wall. Watching. Some were in armor, some not; one of those who wasn't had a flowing gray beard, and some of the saddest gold eyes Bo had ever seen. *General Iroh. And I thought I was going to rescue you.*

The way the night had been going, Bo almost wasn't surprised to see a Dai Li loom up out of the smoke. Though he did wonder where the man's hat had gotten to. "State your business," the agent said bluntly.

Bo blinked, and blinked again. Not his imagination. In better light, the ribbon on the Dai Li's braid was *red*. "Sergeant Bo. Retired. I've... um... got some letters for a tea merchant, name of Mushi. Heard he might be up this way."

"Did you." The agent gave him an appraising look, eyes picking out the knives and brass knuckles tucked around Bo's person as if he were going down a checklist. "This way."

"Okay, I gotta ask," Bo sighed as they headed toward red uniforms. "What's one of you guys doing all the way up here? Long walk from the Inner Ring."

"I never did like the Inner Ring," the agent mused. "I was assigned here, Sergeant. By order of his majesty, Earth King Kuei, to observe and report that the treaty was carried out in exact detail, with the spirits' blessing."

Erk. Near the base of the wall, Bo stopped in his tracks. "You mean, the general really was..." 'Cause sure, he'd been willing to believe Fong was *overenthusiastic*, and that Dragons' Wings wasn't lying about having a treaty, but - the *spirits* were mixed up in this? Why?

"In violation of his orders, if you want to put it kindly," the Dai Li said dryly. "Though I think the Earth King will see it more as malicious treason. A few more minutes of earthbenders tearing the caldera apart, and Asagitatsus would have erupted. Which would have killed us, and everyone within a hundred miles of us. Including Avatar Aang." His voice darkened. "And that would only include the immediate deaths. History shows us Asagitatsus's ash can freeze the earth even to Ba Sing Se. The Earth Kingdom starving, and no Avatar to stop the Fire Lord... yes. I think Earth King Kuei *would* call it treason."

Bo shivered, unable to make his feet move. He'd walked into blood and battles and even fire. But right now - no. He couldn't go any closer to red armor. Not now.

Generals and kings. Always pushing men around like Pai Sho tiles, never tell us why. Damn it, he's the Grand Lotus. I thought he was past all that.

The agent gave him a second look, and nodded. "I'll let him know you're here."

Bo shrugged in reluctant thanks, watching the small knot of armored firebenders above him. Huh; there was one whose armor didn't match, like it was all made for somebody taller. Maybe one of the rare girls he'd found on the battlefield-

Lantern-light caught the scar, as pale gold eyes stared over the battlefield.

Bo frowned, uneasy. That didn't look right for a youngster after his first major action. He couldn't put his finger on why. Just, not *right*.

"Sir?" An older firebender, in marine armor, helmet pulled off to show short gray hair as he approached the exiled prince. "Sir. My lord."

And that was another thing that wasn't right, Bo realized, as the first light before dawn started creeping into the sky. Not that he knew a lot about Fire Nation manners, but you had to know *something* about prisoners you caught. *Sir* and *my lord* together didn't go to an exiled kid. They went to the ranking military officer on the field. Didn't they?

The prince started, then took a deep breath. "Sergeant Kyo. We need to arrange an honorable burial. It wasn't their fault their commander was..."

"A rock-headed idiot, sir?" the marine offered.

"A fanatic," Zuko said grimly. "Honorable burial. And pyres for our people."

"You did warn him, sir."

"I know." The young man's voice was bleak. "The Avatar bends the truth and nobody ever calls him on it. I tell people what I'm going to do, and nobody believes me. I don't *understand* people."

"Sir, when someone in your family says they're going to find a man, decapitate him, and burn any town that sheltered him to the bedrock, most people don't want to believe it." The sergeant shrugged. "The Avatar's everybody's spirit-tale. Your clan deals in reality. Mean and bloody as it gets. Most people... well, they can't take too much reality. Not without a hell of a stiff drink." Kyo waited a moment, then gave the prince a sidelong glance. "Sir. I think the lieutenant had some good advice."

"I know," Zuko breathed. "I will. I just wanted to see..."

Cloth caught the wind with a snap, and Bo turned westward.

A flag fluttered high above the wall; the triangular banner-and-streamers Bo had seen above a hundred Fire Nation camps. Only - not scarlet.

Pale, bright blue caught the first full rays of sunlight, streamers of muted blue-green fluttering in the breeze. Fire-red threads embroidered five characters at the flag's heart, four wheeling about the center.

Water. Earth. Fire. Air. Spirit.

Zuko drew himself up, and nodded. "Carry on, Sergeant."

Trying not to gape, Bo watched him walk away. And jumped a foot, when someone cleared his throat behind him. "Gah!"

General Iroh smirked at him. "Sergeant Bo. I hear you have letters for a friend."

"Yes, sir," Bo said stiffly. Great; a Dai Li knew Mushi and General Iroh were connected. What else could go wrong?

Which led him to glance at the wall again, and the pass, and the bodies still lying where they'd fallen. And trying not to shiver, as all the facts finally fit together. "I was going to say all the polite words about your victory, General." As viciously as possible. It was amazing how sharp a good sergeant could make his tongue, without ever using a foul word. Fanatic general or not, these were his people. "But it wasn't you. Was it."

"I had planned an attack from the rear," Iroh admitted. "It would have had much the same result. But it would have taken longer, and more of our people would have died to defeat you. My nephew... invented a different approach." Dark gold was hard. "Had we followed my intent, General Fong would have slain us all. I knew the man was driven, but to deliberately tear at the foundations of an active volcano..."

"His plan." Bo got out. Felt like his stomach had relocated somewhere near his sandals. *He's just a kid. Just a kid.*

Guanyin's merciful veil - what was he going to be like if he got older?

"My niece recites military history well," Iroh mused. "But it seems my nephew has inherited his father's gift for... aggressive improvisation." The general smiled. "Would you care for tea?"

Water that didn't taste like smoke and copper. Zuko cupped it in his hands, swallowing slow, measured gulps when what he wanted to do was pour the whole pitcher down his throat like a desert-lost madman.

He wanted to. But he didn't. Too much water was like too much anything else. It'd hurt you if you were lucky. Worse if you weren't.

Zuko splashed what was left in his hands over his face, trying not to think about worse.

They'd found a lot of springs along the caldera wall, water seeping through volcano-shattered rock to run as quick, clear glints through moss and ferns. Some they'd channeled into cisterns and tunnels to the fledgling settlement. Some they'd just left alone. This one split the difference. There was a basin, and a shaped ledge for a rough bench, with a hollow under it for buckets and other useful things. Not that too many people used them, besides his marines. This spring was almost a third of the way up the wall. Inconvenient. With enough of a climb to it that the average refugee was cursing all steep slopes before they were halfway to the springhead. And that didn't even begin to consider the rattle-vipers.

Chewing another bit of flesh off a long, wriggly skeleton, Asahi burped.

"You've been around Rikiya too long," Zuko muttered. "You're picking up bad habits." He tapped a foot on the ground, looking for any movement. Most of the surviving rattle-vipers near Dragons' Wings had figured out an ostrich-horse scratching at the ground was a reason to be elsewhere. Most of them.

Dark eyes blinked at him. Beak plucking up a bit of leftover spiny skin, Asahi tossed her head his

way.

"No thanks. Not hungry." His stomach was still a seething mass of knots. He'd promised Uncle he would eat something; it was the only reason people had let him escape to be alone this long. And he would. Just - not quite yet.

More water. And have some salt with it. Don't be an idiot.

Yeah. Idiots got themselves dead. Worse, they got other people dead. Whole piles of-

Zuko shut away memories of fire and wind, walking back to the rough-shaped spout diverting part of the spring into an easy fall for a bucket. Filled his pitcher with more water, and moved just as deliberately back to the bench.

Don't think about it.

Sip water. Splash water. Nibble a tiny bit of dried red dulse and salted aya-salmon. Swallow hard, and let his stomach think that over before he tried anything more solid.

But most of all, just breathe. And try to feel where Asagitatsu was cranky. She hadn't liked Fong's last, desperate move...

Fire filled his mind again, and Zuko had to hug himself against the early morning chill.

I don't want to do that again. Ever.

Now, if only he could lie to himself and say he'd never have to.

Asahi chirped at him. Nudged an empty skin with her talons.

Zuko sighed. "We'll look for some more later-"

A shadow moved with the wind.

Silent, Zuko watched Aang land, pasty-faced and shaken as he'd ever seen the airbender. Waited, while Aang folded up his airstaff, thin hands fiddling over a task he knew the Avatar could do in his sleep.

He looks bad. And he's not saying anything.

For Aang, that was a bad sign.

I came up here to be alone, damn it.

Didn't matter what he wanted. He had responsibilities. And one of them had just dropped in for a visit.

Still silent, Zuko poured a little more water into his hands; cupping it over smoke-reddened eyes, patting the rest over forehead, cheeks, and hot throat. He stepped away from the pitcher, one shoulder lifting in a half-shrug.

Biting his lip, Aang poured some into his hand. Gulped it, and stared back toward the thin trails of smoke still marking the Chip.

Hair shadowing his eyes, Zuko waited.

"That was... awful."

Understatement. "Yes," Zuko said quietly. "It was."

"How could you do that?" Aang's eyes were wet. "How could... there had to be another way."

"I had to stop him," Zuko said simply. "Before he ripped the caldera apart. Before he killed everyone, and drove Asagitatsu over the edge." He met that gray gaze, too tired to soften the blow. "I had to stop him, before Asagitatsu killed you."

Aang went dead white.

Damn it. Never know what to say. "Sit down."

One hand fumbling along stone, Aang all but fell onto the bench, never taking his eyes off Zuko. "You... had to... but...!"

"That didn't come out right." Zuko rubbed at a knot of headache, habit making him check Asahi's beak wasn't anywhere near Aang's skin. She would bite, if she thought she could get away with it. "Aang... damn it. Have any of the other Avatars told you about the Face-Stealer? What he's done? What he's after?"

"Roku told me he was dangerous. Kuruk said he stole his girlfriend." Aang took another gulp of water. "Yangchen said he gave Xiangchen visions. And that was part of what killed her."

"Great. Spirit advisors who don't tell you about the spirits. Makes perfect sense." Zuko sighed. "It's a long story. We put it together in bits and pieces. But ages before humans were ever here, the Face-Stealer was. The spirit of the world created him. Because when things live, they have to die. The world was like that a long time. Life, death, and spirits."

"And the Avatar," Aang said bleakly.

"We don't think there was an Avatar then," Zuko told him. "Not until the spirit of the world decided it had to understand humans. So - it became a human. It left the spirit world, like the Moon and Ocean did, to live in a real body. And never went back. Not to stay." He glanced at Aang. "It came to our world, and left the Face-Stealer - its child, its student - alone."

The airbender gulped, eyes wide.

Yeah. He gets that, Zuko thought, utterly tired. "Who knows how long that went on. But a thousand years before Yangchen was born, Avatar Kesuk went insane. And humans - and dragons, and sky bison - they did what they had to, to stop her. Right here." Zuko waved at the bowl of the caldera. "You know how you feel about the firebenders who killed Master Gyatso? That's how Koh feels about us. All of us."

"But... everybody who attacked the Temple is gone," Aang got out. "And - even if they weren't, Gyatso wouldn't want me to..." He trailed off, shivering.

"No," Zuko agreed. "He was a good man." He looked toward the smoke again, like worrying a loose tooth. "But that takes a lot of courage. To say, I'm going to stop. I've had enough. Done enough. Nobody else has to die." He grimaced. "And Fong -"

"Fong wasn't really brave. Was he." Aang was fingering his staff again, eyes anywhere but on pale gold. "Not the way Sokka is, fighting Azula when he can't even bend. Or Toph. That was... what she did in the pass..." He shook his head, wide-eyed. "And Katara. You should have seen her

during the eclipse. She fought a dragon!"

Damn. That's where Makoto got to, Zuko realized. So where was she now? He had to know!

But Aang was still as shaken and horrified as Zuko had been in a back alley years ago, with the bodies still burning around him. And he remembered how that awful night had felt, how numb and bleak and empty the world had been...

Aang needed someone to listen, before he flew apart. Makoto would have to wait.

"But Fong wasn't brave like that," Aang said, almost a whisper. "If he was brave, he would have believed in Kuei."

Huh?

"But I still don't know *how* you could do that." Aang's voice was ragged; he wiped at wet eyes. "It wasn't - wasn't like the North Pole. Or when Fong scared Katara. Or anything like that. You knew you were going to - to hurt them. And you still did it."

"I knew I was going to kill them," Zuko said flatly. "And I did it because I had to. Because Fong was going to kill us. Because if we die, the last chance for calming Asagitatsu down dies with us. Because the great spirits are using us all in the Face-Stealer's damn grudge match, and that is going to *stop*." He breathed in; let a little steam escape. "But when you cut through all the reasons, Aang? I did it because I am a great name, and that's what we *do*. I hate death. I hate killing. But Fong was going to kill my people and I *would not allow that to happen*." He took another breath, and swallowed back any hint of tears. "So I killed him. That's who I am. That's *what* I am. Zuko, son of Ursa, and Fire Lord Ozai. If there's anyone in my family who *can't* kill - I don't know them." He had to look away. "So maybe... maybe you should stop asking *how*. You're not me."

You're not me.

Aang rocked back on his heels, not sure what to think. On one hand, it was kind of a relief. On the other- "Guru Pathik said we were all one. That the differences between people were just an illusion."

Zuko gave him a *look*. The kind Sokka had given Katara, after they'd caught her feeding Appa purple tongue-dyeing berries. The firebender groaned, and scooped up another handful of water to splash his face. "Way too long a night for this..."

Aang frowned. "You think he's wrong."

"I think," Zuko said, careful as somebody trying to balance three trays of air-cakes, "you're trying to take something *really* complicated, and make it way too simple."

Oh, come on. "Master Gyatso said the mark of a master was being able to make complicated things simple," Aang stated.

Zuko's brow went up. "And you think you've mastered people?"

"Well - yeah," Aang shrugged. "I cleared all my chakras. It's not like bending!"

Zuko cocked his head, studying him through that scarred eye. Just like-

Just like Temul. Aang held back a shiver.

"So you think bending is the hardest thing to master," Zuko said neutrally.

Um. There was a trap here, he just knew it. "I'm the youngest airbending master in the world!"

"You're the Avatar," Zuko said, deadpan. "From where I'm standing, that makes you the *oldest* airbending master in the world."

Aang sputtered. That? That was just not *fair*. He'd earned his arrows, everybody in the Temple had said so-!

"People aren't simple," Zuko went on. "If they were, there wouldn't be dead soldiers down there. Men I didn't want to kill. Men *none* of us wanted to kill. But we didn't have a choice - no! You stop right there, Aang. We *had no choice*. Because those soldiers, those Earth Kingdom men who might have been our own *family*, were the soldiers following Fong. Who *kept* following him, even when he told them an airbending master - an *Air Nomad* - wanted them to wipe out *women and children*."

"But that's a lie!" Aang protested. "I wouldn't do that. I told him I wouldn't! I told him I *couldn't*! I'd *never* want that to happen. He was lying to them! Why couldn't they understand that?"

"You don't want that to happen," Zuko breathed. "Really." Fists clenched, and steam hissed from flared nostrils. "Then *do something about it!*"

Heart beating fast, Aang backed up a step. Maybe... maybe this really wasn't a good idea...

"You want to stop the fighting? You want to keep people from dying? Then you need to stop running when things get hard," Zuko said grimly. "You need to stop. And think. And *listen*. And you need to be smart, Aang. You need to be very, *very* smart. Because the only way to stop something like *that*," he flung a hand toward the Chip, "without killing *everybody*, is to stop the fight before it *ever starts*."

"But... you started this fight by coming here," Aang protested. "None of this had to happen!"

"I started this?" Zuko's voice was ice. "I thought you said Fong should have been brave enough to believe in Kuei."

Eep. "Well, yeah, but-"

"Stop." Zuko shook his head, slow and deliberate. "Just stop. And listen. To *yourself*. You say I started this. You say Fong should have believed in Kuei. *One of those is a lie*."

"No," Aang insisted; heart racing, hands almost shaking. "No, it's not. I'm an *airbender*, we don't lie!"

"Ty Lee is an airbender." Zuko's eyes were cold. And sad. "And her entire life was a lie."

Aang gripped his airstaff hard, feeling the ground wobble under him. "That's not true!" Because if *that* was true, then...

Then Fong hadn't believed *anything* Aang had told him. Fong hadn't believed it was the Avatar Spirit who'd done those horrible things at the North Pole. He'd thought *Aang* could kill. Which meant-

Fong believed I was a liar. Fong believed... he could say the Avatar wanted people to die, and I'd do it, if he just hurt my friends enough...

"You were right about Fong," Zuko went on, voice almost as quiet as the wind. "He was a fanatic. Which means he was a coward. Brave people believe they can be wrong. That things get *complicated*, and life is never as simple as we want it to be. And that you never use anyone else as an *excuse*." He reached out to lay a hand on black fur and feathers, rubbing behind pricked ears. "Funny thing about being brave. It looks a lot like being scared. Difference is... you don't run." He drew a deep breath. "So decide where you stand, Aang. And *stand*."

Chapter End Notes

"Shichi ni sunawachi, tatakae." (In death ground, fight.) Got to love Sun Tzu...

Chapter 73

Sleep. Want sleep. Heading back down the caldera wall with Asahi, Zuko sighed. Sleep would be good. Not that he expected to get any anytime soon. Not with fires replaying in his head.

Though, who knew. Aang had said he was going to be taking Katara up to the Northern Air Temple today, so they could talk to Teo again. And the mere thought of Aang being *somewhere else*, where he couldn't set Asagitatsu off with a sneeze or a tantrum, was enough of a relief to almost knock him out right here-

Sliding closed as he walked, eyes caught a glimpse of ghastly, writhing black.

Zuko stopped. Blinked. Tilted his head back and forth, trying to figure out exactly what he was seeing. From the neck down it looked like a girl in Earth Kingdom travel clothes. But above? "Did a boarupine nest on your head while you were sleeping, or did everybody clear out of the Fire Nation so fast you forgot your combs?"

"Bite me, Sparky." Toph ran frustrated fingers through a poof of black hair, yanking knots tighter. "Nothing wrong with a good coat of dirt."

"There is if Jia sees you," Zuko said wryly. Darn it, Toph should still be in bed. The way she'd curled up on a rock after the flames burned out and the aftershocks died down - if it'd been him, he would have slept for a week. *Should think of a way to get her back there. Somehow.* "She figured out a way to bend the soil around here so it *scrubs* you coming off. She did it to Jinhai when he wouldn't come in for a bath. You should have heard him howl."

"Huh." Toph's fingers froze. Deliberately, she untangled them from knotted hair, and made a couple brushing motions that left her noticeably paler. "Does everybody's brother and sister act crazy to each other?"

Zuko snorted, almost feeling up to laughing. "You're asking me?"

For a moment, Toph just stood there, listening. Like she couldn't quite believe he'd said that.

Zuko was never sure which of them started snickering first.

"You - Azula - *nursery*," Toph managed to get out.

"Dolls lined up in siege ranks," Zuko snickered back, leaning on black feathers. "Ladies-in-waiting were *kunoichi*, shopkeepers and nobles got drafted. 'Forward, my minions!' Kind of cute. At least, if she didn't know I was there..." Um. Okay. This was awkward.

"You want to know about Azula." Toph pointed at his sandals. "You shuffled your feet like Sokka does when he's trying to sneak around asking straight out. Then you got your stance set so you could punch or run like heck. Got to be Azula."

Oh yes. Awkward. "Is she okay?" Zuko blurted out. "You're here, so the invasion didn't work, and Katara didn't say anything about Azula being dead, and she *would*, and... that didn't sound good, did it."

Toph stuck her tongue out at him. "Dummy. You know Katara's nicer than that." She sucked her tongue back in, and shrugged. "Okay, you *wouldn't* know. But she is. Most of the time."

"I'll take your word for it," Zuko said simply. Toph knew Katara. He didn't, not really. Chasing someone halfway across the world wasn't *knowing* them. Granted, he could predict that any time Katara thought about him, she wanted to break things. But she wasn't like that all the time.

Just a lot of it. "So... do you know anything?" Zuko said hopefully. "Katara said something about, Azula was watching..."

"She was doing what Sokka said you were doing," Toph said bluntly. "Keeping an eye on the whole battlefield." She grimaced. "Your sister's scary, you know that? She figured Aang would jump in before he could think about it, and she took him down with just a chi-blocker and... man, I don't know what she said, but it rattled him almost as bad as Ba Sing Se going down. Dunno if you can do anything about that- What?"

Zuko swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. "But she didn't hurt him. Physically." With Azula, you always had to qualify that. "She left him alive."

"Yeah," Toph drew the word out. "Sparky? What'd you do?"

There was no way this was going to sound good. "I didn't think you were going to stick to Sokka's plan," Zuko began, trying to keep it simple. "I didn't... Azula was in the palace. She finds things out. She finds *everything* out. She chased you all the way to Ba Sing Se. I thought you'd know. If Azula gets near your plan, you have to change it." He winced. "Toph. I grew up learning the math we use to calculate eclipses. I thought everybody had to know that."

Toph's toes tapped the ground. "You thought Twinkletoes *knew* he was heading into a trap."

Ouch. "I know. When you put it that way..." Zuko knuckled the side of his brow. "We were talking to Teo after Hakoda left, and he said... never mind. I was wrong. But there wasn't anything I could do from here." He took a breath. "So I sent a message to Azula. I asked to consider - just consider - how a Water Tribe Avatar might not be in the best interests of the Fire Nation."

Toph's jaw dropped.

"Yes, she's crazy," Zuko said grimly, hating that look on her face. Hating how it hurt to even explain; Toph couldn't know how the bottom had dropped out of the world when he'd finally realized that Sokka *wasn't* pulling an elaborate ruse on the Fire Lord. Sokka honestly didn't know. "She's vicious, and she's cruel, and she's probably killed more people for annoying her than we all took out last night. But she's not stupid. Aang is an Air Monk. Bottom line? He doesn't want to hurt anyone. A Water Tribe Avatar, with what they teach is proper revenge?" Slowly, he shook his head. "She's my sister, Toph. She's evil and she's crazy, but she always - *always* - thinks about her options. When somebody's dead, they don't give you any more options."

"You told her we were coming." Toph's voice wobbled.

Zuko grimaced. "She already knew-"

"But you didn't know that!" Toph was sniffing now, milky green eyes wet. "You didn't know, and you told her, and - she blew up ships, and she blew up people, it was *awful*..."

"I wish I could have thought of something else," Zuko got out, hurting. "I couldn't find another way, Toph. She was going to kill *something*. It was Aang or your army, and if she'd killed Aang-"

"Spirits ticked off, Fire Nation wiped out in sixteen years by a Water Tribe Avatar," Toph snapped. Fists clenched, denying the water leaking from her eyes. "I *get* it."

"No!" Zuko slashed his hand across, a ripple of heat in air. "If she'd killed Aang, she would have killed *you*!"

Toph gulped. Blinked, another tear trickling down.

"If she targeted Aang, all of you would have tried to stop her," Zuko got out, weary to the bone. "That's what sworn warriors of a great name do. And if any of them, especially a sworn bender, escapes an ambush that kills their lord - a sworn warrior doesn't surrender. He hides out, maybe for years, gets together a raiding party, and comes back. Hell, Toph, we have *plays* about it. The only way to take out a great name and have peace is to take out all their sworn *with* him. And you're a master bender. You trained this Avatar. Azula would be stupid to leave you alive to get stronger and train the next Avatar. My sister is crazy. *Not stupid*." He gripped his cuff, and swiped at prickling eyes. "Forget strategy. Forget spirits. Forget all the good reasons. If Azula tried to kill Aang she was going to go through you to do it. And if she did that, one of you, maybe both of you... you're my friend, and she's still my *sister*..."

Asahi rumbled, nudging him with her shoulder. Zuko leaned into it, breathing in fur and feathers to blunt the tang of cold ashes. Words. Sometimes he just hated words.

A gritty hand touched his. "Zuko?"

He wrapped her up in one of Uncle's hugs, bristly hair and all, wishing he could just explain. Azula was like being tangled in a killer rose-vine. It hurt, and he had to get away or die. But she was alive, she was family, and he couldn't destroy her without knowing he'd kill part of himself.

And you're my friend. How can I let someone kill my friend?

Steady and snarky and always willing to poke things. Earthbender, heck; Toph was like one of the first rays of dawn, climbing out of the sky to tickle every shadow into giving up its secrets.

My friend. My family. How can I choose?

Hugging Zuko was like hugging fire. Warm, but it hurt.

Like Shidan, Toph thought. *Only Zuko's all kinds of tangled up inside.*

Part of the tangle was a hurt-and-sad that tasted like tears, and echoed with the screams she'd heard when Asagitatsu was trying to shake apart. Another bit was relief, like wrapping a down quilt around you on a snowy morning; she was alive, his people were alive, and Aang had actually *listened* for a few minutes. A third part of the knot was need-and-needed, that burned like not enough air to breathe and tugged like chains; one way was Azula, another was Dragons' Wings, and two others were *Shidan-and-kin* and *Toph-and-everyone-helping-her*.

And wrapped around all that need and want and hurt was a memory Zuko had tagged as *this is like Toph*. Fingers gripping granite as he climbed, trusting feeling more than sight as stone warmed and shadows shifted with the breaking dawn.

Zuko thought she was like sunrise on mountains. That was kind of cool. But... "Um. Sparky? Ease up a little. Breathing's good."

"Ease up...?" The tangle of tears and chains fell away like it'd been cut, as Zuko let go and backed off three steps, running into Asahi. "Right. Not Uncle. That wasn't... appropriate."

Oh man, now where had his screwy reflexes jumped to? 'Cause she could feel a tension in his

stance that hadn't been there a second ago. And what was with the distance all of a sudden?

"You've been having nightmares." Zuko's voice was cool, but worried. "Ow. How do you know when you're not having a nightmare? When I wake up, I look for light."

"Smells." Toph wrinkled her nose. "Nothing smells, in a dream. How did you know about the bad dreams?" Duh, he'd pulled a Shidan and snarfed it out of her head-

"After last night? Everybody has nightmares."

...Or, maybe not. Weird. He'd felt like Shidan for a minute. But he couldn't feel her? That sucked.

"They get better," Zuko went on quietly. "After a while. I know what that sounds like, but it doesn't make you a bad person. Just someone who's still alive."

Toph shuddered. "If that's Uncle's advice, we've got to tell him he's crazier than Fong... was." Ooof. It was still hard to think that way.

"It's not." Zuko shifted; an *after you* sort of shrug and wave. "Come on. I know a way to get to the Wens that dodges most of the triage areas." From the tremor of earth, his toes were gripping his sandal thongs hard. "I can't... do that again. Not yet. If Amaya wants to mend fences with Katara by healing some of the Earth Army so they can get *out* of here - that's her decision. Better if I'm not there."

Not just toes clenched, Toph realized. That stance was definitely fists clenched, too. "What's wrong?"

A resigned sigh. "They're the enemy, Toph. We beat them, but they're my people's enemy, and they're wounded, and they're *not gone*. That's... I don't like it." Zuko took a deep breath, and shook his head. "I need sleep."

Toph took a testing step forward, felt him fade back another foot. Darn. What the heck was so *not appropriate* about a hug? "They're just hurt people now, right? You've got a treaty."

"I've got a treaty with Earth King Kuei," Zuko said flatly. "General Fong wouldn't take orders from Ba Sing Se. Major Yilin... he knows we outnumber him now. Maybe he'll behave. *Maybe*." Zuko winced. "I just want them to *go away*. My people have enough problems, and now Aang's here, and... yeah. You like Aang. I'll just go... drown myself under a waterfall or something, I shouldn't *talk* to people when I'm this tired..." He trailed off, feet shifting as he straightened.

Toph turned toward the black gaping area that was the water below. Whatever had caught Zuko's sight, it had to be that way. "What's there?"

"The cone." Some of the weary embarrassment dropped out of his voice. "Steam looks... okay. Okay, *good*. Spirits, I thought Fong had killed us all-" He cut himself off. "Toph? Reach into the caldera. Just a little deeper."

Eep. But this was Zuko's domain. He knew what he was doing. Maybe.

Weird, to reach into earth that crackled and warmed, the farther you got from the surface.

"Honored Asagitatsu," Zuko said quietly. "This is Lady Toph Bei Fong."

...And the earth seemed to sizzle against her toes. Eep, eep, *eep*.

"I think she could help." There was just a little grin in his voice. "She's the greatest earthbender in the world."

Sizzling, but not burning. *Hope you know what you're doing, Sparky.*

"If you're willing, she could help us. If you want her to."

Warmth, like sunlight through windows, wrapping around her like a badger-mole's testing paw. A sense of movement in the air, like a massive snuffling breath.

"So..." Zuko drew the word out. "You mind if she walks around and has a feel for what needs to be fixed? I know she'll be careful."

Earth-child. It echoed in her bones; like she was hearing it through her skull, not her ears. *Be welcome.*

Warmth slipped away, and earth was only earth.

Zuko laughed, just a little. "I think she likes you."

"So you just whirl it," Aang spun air between his palms, tighter and tighter, "and then you go!" Seated on his airball, he buzzed around the Temple courtyard.

And for the first time in way too long, he wasn't alone. There was lanky Jing, and curious Ke, and even Sima; though that was kind of weird, a *girl* bending right along with everybody else crashing through the air-

And Teo, grinning off to the side with Katara, tossing his own mini-airballs into the fray whenever anybody looked like they were getting carried away. Teo couldn't ride an airball in his chair. Yet. But Aang was sure he'd figure out a way, eventually.

Grinning, Aang put his feet down just before the ball vanished out from under him. "You figured all the rest of this out from scrolls?"

"Scrolls and Langxue," Teo nodded, letting the breeze fade from around his hands. "He's just as clueless as we are most of the time, but at least he knows when he's getting it... um."

Right. Put that together with some of the things Aang had seen the wind do as Zuko bent a pass full of fire... yeah. He knew what Langxue had to be. "He's a yāorén."

"You know about that?" Teo said cautiously.

Aang nodded, still tangled up in knots about the whole thing. "Yangchen told me. Two-element benders. They're supposed to help the Avatar. So why is he *here*?" That was what really stung. If the Avatar was supposed to have help from the spirits, not just friends who'd decided to help him on their own - he could have really, really used another airbender at the eclipse. Why hadn't Langxue been where they *needed* him? Weren't yāorén supposed to serve the spirits?

More important, why was Langxue doing everything he could to stay *away* from Aang? He'd barely seen the yāorén. Sure, Langxue had been there while the flames were dying down, wafting smoke away while Sokka and Appa looked for him along the rim of the caldera. He'd stayed while they dragged Aang to Katara so she could heal the bump on his head; landing after that fiery updraft had *not* been fun.

And then Langxue had left. And Aang had no clue why. It wasn't *that* big of a bump, and why did it matter how he'd gotten it? He'd been trying to stop two armies from killing each other!

But even though Langxue had *looked* like he was listening to Aang's rapid-fire account of diving into the pass, he must have already made up his mind who was really right. That Sokka and Katara's version of why they were in the middle of a night battle in the first place - which Sokka apparently thought was *Aang's fault*, for some weird reason - was the right one, and everything had just gone downwind from there. Because he'd let Aang talk for about five minutes, then started shaking his head, curled fingers into fists that got intercepted by a not-very-happy Saoluan, and finally flung up his hands with a snarled, "*Idiot.*"

And left. Aang couldn't *believe* he'd left.

Sure, Langxue was a waterbender, and maybe Zuko's people needed healers right now, and yeah, maybe Aang *had* said something about swords and benders who thought they needed weapons to hurt people, but - Langxue was using *air*. And airbenders weren't supposed to be violent. Ever. That was what being an Air Monk was all about. If Langxue was an airbender, he had to put that sword *down*.

Which was when Saoluan had... heh. If it was Sokka, Aang would think she'd kept Langxue from trying to punch him out. Which was crazy. He *knew* what Langxue was.

But the yāorén had left. How could he do that?

I'm the Avatar. You're supposed to help me!

"Two-element benders?" Katara's blue eyes were wide as teacups. "That's crazy. If the spirits give you bending, they only bless you with *one* element."

"Yangchen said that's not always true." Aang shifted his shoulders. Sounded weird to him, too. "She said the Avatar wasn't supposed to have to take care of the whole world all at once by himself. The Great Spirits find people who can help. Only they've just... been dying." He swallowed a lump in his throat. "They've been dying for a long time. So Kuruk didn't have any help, and Kyoshi didn't, and Roku didn't. And that's part of why the world's such a *mess*." He closed a fist on his airstaff, trying not to blow things away just because he was upset. "But she wouldn't tell me who was killing them!"

Teo's gliders looked at each other. Kima gave Teo a *look*, that reminded Aang of Sokka looking at Katara: *Tell him, or I will.*

Teo took a deep breath, and sighed. "Yeah. I bet she wouldn't."

Aang snapped his full attention to Teo. "Why not? She was the Avatar, I'm the Avatar - why wouldn't she tell me?"

"Maybe because you're the Avatar?" Kima muttered.

Teo shot her a look, and shook his head. "Aang. It's... not as simple as you think. Langxue warned us about element-starvation. In case one of our earthbending relatives got stuck up here and some spirits got ideas. If he's right... it's not any *person* killing them." He bit his lip. "Aang - spirits *hurt* people to make them a yāorén. They hurt Langxue. If he hadn't found Amaya... she's not a regular healer. She's a *spirit-healer*. Without her, he would have died."

One heartbeat drummed in Aang's ears. Two. "That doesn't even make sense," he insisted. Because it just couldn't. Could it?

"He's right," Katara nodded. "Why would the spirits give someone another blessing, then just let them die?"

Because- Aang shook his head, trying to shake away the thought. Brrr.

"Aang?" Katara's brows drew down, concerned. "What's wrong?"

Oh, he really didn't like this. But she was asking. "Shaman Tao said, one of the reasons there's an Avatar is because spirits don't think like people," Aang said reluctantly. "And sometimes they can't tell people apart really well. Like Hei Bai. Sokka never hurt his forest. He was just trying to help me talk to Hei Bai. But the spirit took him anyway, because Hei Bai was... well, mad. And hurting. And it was humans that hurt him, and we were *there*." He traced a toe through some of the dust that had escaped scouring winds. "Or the Painted Lady. She wanted to help her village. She just couldn't. And she didn't want to hurt *you*, but she had to. Because she was a spirit, and spirits have rules, and..." Oh. *Oh*.

Oh, monkeyfeathers.

"You okay?" Ke whipped across the courtyard to the inner wall, hauling back double fistfuls of carved wooden mugs of water. "Air up here can dry you out fast, you never see it coming... um. But you know about that."

"Yeah. But thanks." Aang gave Ke a try at a grin, and gulped down snow-cool water. Whoof. "Katara? Langxue... he *might* be right."

In the middle of lifting her own mug, Katara glanced at him in disbelief. "How could he be right? The spirits wouldn't set people up just to die!"

"But... they might not *know* people were going to die," Aang said reluctantly. "All the other bending healers got lost. I guess spirit-healers could be, too. Yangchen said yāorén get pulled toward the spirits, and then they get pulled back toward people, and then they're a bridge." He gulped. "So... if the spirits do their job, and tug people one way, but there's nobody left to tug them back... then humans aren't making their part of the bridge. And that's not the spirits' fault."

Katara hugged herself against a chill breeze. "But how can you say that? If there weren't spirit-healers, then we couldn't do what the spirits want. That's not our fault!"

"But it's what we have to do," Aang said, trying not to think of the incredulous fury that had blazed in Langxue's face. Trying hard. Because he was the Avatar, he had to fix the world, and he needed all the help he could get-

But Katara and every one of his friends were helping him because they *wanted* to. They didn't - the spirits hadn't - it wasn't like he'd ever *asked* the spirits to - to...

But I did, didn't I? Aang admitted to himself. *I told Roku I couldn't do it on my own. I told him, and Kyoshi, and Kuruk, and even Yangchen. If the spirits want me to fix things - I'm just one kid!*

So he had asked. And when you asked the spirits for help-

Koh. The Painted Lady. Temul.

Yue, fading away in Sokka's arms. Katara, trapped behind a spirit's eyes. Sokka, laughs gone silent and secret when he thought people didn't see, coming back to camp bruised and singed when there wasn't an enemy firebender for miles.

Ask the spirits for a favor, and there was *always* a price. And... he was the Avatar. *He* wasn't the one who ended up paying.

"I think I made a mistake," Aang whispered. He didn't want to ask, he really didn't; he wanted everybody to be helping him because they *wanted* to be. But-

That's... kind of what Fong did, isn't it? He thought everybody wanted what he wanted. Even when they were screaming at him to stop.

I'm not going to be Fong. I'm not like him!

Aang swallowed hard. "Teo. Did Langxue... want to be a yāorén?"

Teo glanced down. Winced, and shook his head. "He didn't like talking about it. But he said nobody wants to be one. You just end up in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the spirits take you."

"Oh," Aang whispered. Oh, monkey-feathers. What did he do? This was wrong, it was all wrong, and it was his fault, he was the Avatar-

No. No, that's wrong.

"Not my fault," Aang managed, trying not to look at anybody. "I didn't do it. But... I'm the Avatar. The spirits wouldn't have - done that, if things weren't so..." He shook his head, hurting. "So it's not my fault. But - my responsibility?" He looked at Katara, pleading. *Tell me I'm wrong. Please!*

Blue eyes met his, hurt and sad. "Aang, I..." Her voice died, and she had to look away. "I guess it is."

Aang flinched. *You're not supposed to say things like that! I'm the Avatar; I'm trying to fix things for everybody. You're supposed to-*

Tell him what he wanted to hear? Like Fong?

I'm not him. I won't be like him.

But it hurt.

Only... maybe getting hurt was the right thing to do. Because he was the Avatar. When he made mistakes, when he just didn't know things - people could get hurt. A lot of people could get hurt.

So he had to ask. Even if it hurt. "So... are the drowned my responsibility, too?" Whatever they were. Because with a name like that... he had a really bad feeling about this.

"What? No!" Katara said quickly, crossing the courtyard to put a hand on his arm. "Sometimes bad things happen to people, and it takes their spirits time to get over it. That's all."

Her hand was warm, and comforting, and he just wanted to smile back up at her. Things were going to be all right. Somehow.

"So... do we have to go back down the mountain today?" Katara asked, gaze shifting away. "I guess you have to, if you're going to learn firebending, but - why do you want to learn firebending now?"

She did that on purpose.

On one hand, he couldn't help but feel grateful. He didn't want to be responsible for anyone else's pain. On the other...

She wasn't lying to him. She just wasn't telling the truth. And he'd never noticed it before, because *she wasn't lying*.

Like Zuko's *I don't want to hurt you*. Not a lie. But - and this was scary, just so way scary to think about - *don't want to*, didn't mean Zuko *wouldn't*.

Air dodged. Water *deflected*. How many times had Katara deflected him?

"I don't want to learn firebending," Aang admitted. "I just- I *have* to. An Avatar has to master all four elements. If they don't, they're not really the Avatar. And the spirits won't listen. If I don't learn firebending, I can't lift Kyoshi's decree. And I *have* to." He tried to smile. "If I can't master firebending, I can't beat Ozai. But if I do - then I don't *have* to beat him. I can just make him not the Fire Lord anymore. And if he's not - the Fire Nation doesn't have to follow him anymore. They can *stop fighting*."

Silence. Only the whisper of wind over stones, and Teo's low whistle. "Aang? I hate to say it, but..."

"I know," Aang said in a rush. "Fong... he could have stopped, too. But I have to do this. There are people in the Fire Nation who don't want to fight anymore. If I'm the Avatar - I have to be everybody's Avatar. I have to *try*." Deep breath. He had to get this right. "I know nobody's seen it for a hundred years. But you've all been up there. Where there's nothing holding you up but the wind, and how well you know it. Air is *freedom*. And we're going to bring that freedom back."

Even for the Fire Nation.

Scary, scary thought. Because, well... freedom to stop fighting, kind of meant freedom to *not* stop, didn't it? And what if they didn't?

I don't know, Aang admitted to himself, as the others cheered, and Katara smiled. *But Sokka says, sometimes you've got to kick the ice and start walking.*

And if he didn't pick something to stand for, people like Fong would pick things *for* him. Whether he liked it or not. So he had to find something he believed in. Something he wouldn't run away from...

Or maybe, something he'd run away *for*. Because he'd ended up frozen in the first place so the Elders wouldn't choose for him. Because he'd wanted *his* freedom.

So I'm going to start with that. For everybody.

And hope.

Katara watching the cheering kids sweep Aang inside for snacks, and hugged herself against the wind. *I should have told him. I just... can't.*

Aang wanted so much to believe the world was fair. That he was doing the right thing. And he *was*. Helping the Ocean Spirit had been the right thing to do, and stopping the Invasion of the North was definitely the right thing - and if there were Fire Nation drowned out there, it was their own blasted fault.

Maybe he doesn't have to know.

Because there was no way they were going to stay near Zuko. Firebending teachers or not. Half those people down the mountain didn't like Aang - and how could you not like *Aang*? - and the other half were... confusing. Earth and fire and even a little water mixed up together; who could live like that?

Zuko's people were trying. When she'd been down there, last night, healing anyone she could... one of those long hours, she'd blinked, not sure *whose* burned man was under her hands.

That had been scary. In the dark, you couldn't tell whose side was right. You couldn't even tell who you were fighting for.

How many more times would Aang have to fight in the dark?

"Young! You said he was young!" Out in Amaya's courtyard, away from the most fragile of the wounded, Langxue gripped his saya with his off hand and tried not to imagine pulling the sheathed sword from his belt to beat a certain smug old firebender over the head. "You didn't say he was *stupid*!"

Seated on the low wall around the yard, Saoluan smothered a snicker.

For once, General Iroh looked taken aback. "I understand he has made a less than favorable impression on my nephew, young man. But as a yāorén of old, you must understand how your duty to support the Avatar-"

"My duty to *what*?" Langxue bit out. "Is that what the White Lotus thinks about us? What you've been telling Zuko? No wonder he hides when he sees you coming! He probably thinks you're going to make *him* train Aang, because Agni forbid *you* actually do anything about your crazy brother-" Langxue cut himself off at the firebender's startled blink. Subtle. Hard to catch. But there. "You were! You frosted *idiot*!"

"Whatever your feelings toward the Avatar, Aang *must* be trained," Iroh said impatiently. "You are bound to the spirits, and will do your duty, as the yāorén did for Yangchen-"

"The Avatar has to be trained by a *human*!"

That arched skeptical white brows. "The best benders take their learning from the elements themselves," Iroh said sternly.

"The best human benders," Langxue shot back. "The Avatar Spirit isn't human! The spirit of the world *becomes* a human, so it knows what being human is. And part of being human means learning from human masters. Zuko can't train Aang in firebending. No yāorén can!"

...Damn. Damn it all, he hadn't wanted to say that.

But Iroh has to know, Langxue admitted to himself, feeling Saoluan's startled gaze boring into the back of his head. *He has to know what we really are. Or things are going to get screwed up even worse than they have already. Zuko's a dragon-child. Agni never would have shared him, even with La, if there were any other options.*

"You imply," Iroh said heavily, "that yāorén are not human."

"We're not. Not exactly." Langxue almost reached out for the spring running through the yard, but

thought better of it. He'd save that for if the general got stubborn. "We live like humans. We die like them. But our spirits are tough enough to walk on the edge of the world. That costs us." How did he put this into words, for a firebender whose only knowledge of yāorén was records older than Yangchen's birth? "We can't bend like normal people. Our chi doesn't just touch one element. And it doesn't just move in *this* world."

Iroh seemed to pale a little. "You are bridges to the spirit world. Like the Avatar."

"*Not* like him," Langxue corrected. "The Avatar is a spirit living in the human world. A spirit that can travel back to the spirit world, for a while. We're humans *acknowledged* by the spirits. It's-" He grasped for words. "Look. Aang opens a door, and steps through. He's on one side, he's on the other. He's here, he's there. He's bending the elements, or he's walking in the spirit world. He isn't... he isn't *stuck*."

Iroh folded his arms, gauging his reply. "And you are."

"We're... like cracks in the world," Langxue managed. "We're here. We're *always* here. But... part of us is right on the edge of *there*. All the time." He grimaced. "Part of our chi is touching the spirits. Always. And the Avatar can't learn that." Which wasn't the whole truth, darn it. "He's not *supposed* to contact the spirits that way. And he's definitely not supposed to learn mixing elements until he's got the four main ones down *first*. If we teach him anything, we teach him after he's mastered the four styles. And you know what? *I* am not teaching *that brat* anything." The icy rage threatened to flood him again, like spray from a winter storm. *Give up my sword. Give up my mother's sword.*

Because Air monks weren't supposed to kill. As if not having a sword had *ever* stopped an airbender who wanted people dead.

...And that made his head spin like a monster wave, gut lurching to the point Langxue just wanted to find a corner to hide. And throw up. He'd lived his whole life listening to stories of the peaceful Air Nomads and the evil Fire Nation burning their temples to the ground. *Hyourin* had grown up on the run from White Wind arrows, his family flitting from cove to cove under the cover of waterbent fogs and darkness, until the day a desperate waterbender had gotten caught in a forest fire and ended up with his *soul* burned raw.

We're yāorén, Kaze had said. *We have to protect both worlds. But we can't do it without the Avatar. We have to find her. We have to teach her who she is, and what she has to do.*

They'd had to break an Air nun out of Xiangchen's keeping, keep her *with* them, and help her find teachers. All the while running from Subodei's hunters. With a grown woman who had all an Avatar's power, but who'd never so much as lifted a hand in anger. Who hadn't even dreamed it was *possible*.

Before he'd met Yangchen, Hyourin had hated Air. After...

We broke her heart. We had to, we didn't have a choice. She forgave us all.

But he'd never forgiven himself.

Aang's not Yangchen.

It was the only thing keeping Langxue from doing something crazy. Like stalking up ice and snow to the top of that mountain and *shaking* him.

Though right now, it was a firebender he wanted to shake. "Even if he wasn't a yāorén - you *know*

who Zuko was," Langxue argued. "Why would you ever ask him to teach Aang?"

Iroh regarded him from shadowed eyes. Glanced at Saoluan's curious face, and finally sighed. "I have lost too many friends over the years. Should I not try to reunite an old soul with the friend he gave his life to find?"

The Kyoshi Warrior flinched, and looked away.

Langxue swallowed hard, hurting inside. If he'd been able to live with his family again, even for a little while... "You didn't think it through," Langxue got out, words like broken glass in his throat. "An *old soul*. Kuzon gave his life to fix what Sozin shattered. To save part of the world Sozin and Azulon and *you* were tearing apart. *Dragon of the West*." He did his best not to snarl. "The nightmare you made, Kuzon *lived*. Aang slept through it all. Think about it."

A hundred years. Aang touched down in the shadows near the shoreline, far from where fires burned near Dragons' Wings' docks even at night. *A lot's changed. I didn't want it to be that way, but... it is.*

Sokka had tried to tell him. Katara had. Heck, he'd seen Bumi, and it still hadn't sunken in. Though maybe that was because even a hundred years later, Bumi was still Bumi; the same mad earthbending genius he'd always been. White hair and a king's robes hadn't changed that.

What General Fong had been willing to do, though... and what Zuko had been willing to do to stop him...

It'd been different when Shidan had killed Hama. Shidan was old. Shidan wasn't human. Dealing with Shidan was like dealing with fire that walked and talked and snarled; he was dangerous just by breathing, and you figured that out or got burned. Shidan didn't *do* sorry.

Zuko... Aang took a breath, and blew it across saltwater to watch dark ripples catch glints of firelight. Zuko made him believe it'd been a hundred years.

The way he looked at dawn. Angry, but... sad. Like Kuzon, when-

Oh, Aang did not want to think about that.

But he couldn't forget it. Kuzon's face through Temul's eyes, when the lord of Byakko knew he was dying. When he'd killed people he cared about - people he'd *saved* - because every onmitsu left alive was another that might go after his family. Another Air Nomad who'd serve Azulon, when the Fire Lord was burning down the world.

It was scary, but - part of Aang wondered if Kuzon hadn't *wanted* to die. There had been so much pain there. Pain he'd seen before. In a mirror.

I can't do this anymore.

Only - Kuzon hadn't given up. He'd fought. Down to the last moment, the last breath; telling Piandao the Fire Nation wasn't the Fire Lord. Challenging him to *choose*.

Aang sniffled, and scrubbed at his eyes. Kuzon hadn't given up. But Kuzon had been older. He'd been an Elder. Elders were supposed to make the hard decisions.

And I'm not. I'm just a kid! I shouldn't have to do this!

Surf shushed up the shore, uncaring.

No. Not quite uncaring. There were flashes of light in the water, purple and blue, spreading upward to join a pale white glow from the waxing moon, that billowed and flowed into silk and snow-white hair. "Yue!"

The Moon Spirit reached out, brushing cool light across his reaching fingers. *"You are not alone."*

It was something he could hold onto, like a lantern in the dark. But it still hurt. "If we'd been faster... if we'd just made Zhao stop, it's not fair-!"

"He chose his actions. As the Ocean chose his fate. And I chose mine." Yue shook her head. *"Even spirits can't make the world fair, Aang. We can only try to make it right."*

It staggered him. He had to lean on his airstaff; he wasn't sure Yue *could* have said what she'd just said...

It's not fair. I can't fix the world. It's too big!

Which had made him want to scream, and want to hide, and want to just run away from everyone. Because some things really were impossible, and if he had to splat himself against a mountain, he didn't want Sokka and Katara and Toph getting splatted with him.

But... Yue was saying he *couldn't* make things fair.

We need the Avatar, Sokka had said, what felt like forever ago. *But more than that? We need you.*

"I don't have to fix everything?" Aang got out, almost a whisper. "But I have to stop the Fire Lord, I *have* to stop the war..."

Her fingers curled around his; flowing light. *"You must stop the Fire Lord. Stopping the war... that will be the work of a lifetime."*

Aang's knees gave out. He thumped down onto damp sand, clutching his airstaff like one of Appa's horns. Because yeah, Yue had said stopping the war would take his whole life, and thinking about the killing going on that long was horrible...

But he didn't have to fix it all at once. And that meant he could get people to help. *All* his friends could help. And they could do it a piece at a time, city by city and general by general if they had to. As long as it took. Even if it took years.

And that meant he could do it the way Master Gyatso would want him to do it. Not like Kyoshi, tearing apart an island just to stop one general. Not like Roku, blasting Sozin's palace and then just leaving the problem behind, thinking he'd fixed it.

And not like Zuko. Because Zuko's eyes were like Kuzon's, so angry and sad...

He didn't want to have eyes like that. Ever.

You're not me, Zuko had said. Which had seemed so silly, it was so *obvious*-

"But it's not obvious," Aang realized out loud. "It's... like one of Master Gyatso's koans. The one about the tile."

Pale braids drifting on the wind, Yue raised curious brows. *"I don't know that story."*

"North Pole, ice, yeah. But it's an old story..." Aang hunted in memory. "There's a student, who finds his Elder meditating, and asks him what he's doing. Which I thought was kind of obvious, but... the Elder says he's cleansing his soul so he'll be enlightened." Aang grinned, remembering the wicked way Gyatso's eyes had twinkled at this part. "So the student picks up a tile, and starts polishing it with his robe. The Elder *tries* to keep meditating, but - we're Air. We've got to poke things. So he asks what the student's doing. And the kid says, I'm polishing this tile to make a mirror."

Yue laughed, like a whisper of waves.

"Right!" Aang grinned. "The Elder's scratching his arrow, totally lost, and finally says, it doesn't matter how long you polish it, you can't make a tile a mirror!" And this hadn't made sense before. *Now* it did. "And that's when the kid throws down the tile and says, doesn't matter how long you keep cleansing, that doesn't make you enlightened!"

As the tile shattered, Gyatso's voice murmured in memory, *the Elder was enlightened*.

"A tile's not a mirror," Aang said, amazed and relieved. "I'm not a great warrior. Or a general, or a king, or anything like that. I'm me. I've got to stop the war like *me*. By finding out what's wrong, and how we can fix it." He smiled at Yue. Maybe it *wasn't* impossible. "And... maybe kicking a little butt. After all, I *am* the Avatar."

Laughing, Yue stepped back into the light. "*Be careful, little brother. And good luck.*"

Clouds moved across the moon, and she was gone.

"I'm me," Aang repeated, the words like dropping lead weights away. "Man. I feel so stupid."

At least he'd figured it out. Better late than never, Gyatso would say.

Okay. So if he was going to end the war his way, then he needed to know what was actually going on. Including the stuff Katara had skipped around telling him.

There's something going on with the water down here, so she doesn't want me bending it, Aang reflected. *And bad stuff happened, and people's spirits needed to let go of it.*

So... he could fix that, right? After all, she'd said spirits, not ghosts; so whatever was down there wasn't like Temul, and he could do something. He was supposed to be a bridge between spirits and the world. He'd better bridge.

But if it's people's spirits - I'm going to have to make my power quiet, Aang thought. *Just stay quiet, and listen.*

Hard to do, with the hiss of flames burning yellow and blue from gas bubbling up through the water. Seriously, what was everybody here thinking? Sure, Fire Nation ships were made of metal. Other nations' ships weren't! How could this place claim to be for everybody when fire was burning so loud it drowned out the water?

With a two-handed push, Aang flicked a wave to douse the flames. There. *Now* it was quiet.

So breathe in, and breathe out, and hold everything still...

Something was moving under the water.

Katara said they were drowned, Aang reminded himself. *If they want to talk to me, I guess it*

makes sense that their spirits would come up... from... the...

Rusted red armor. Dripping seaweed, dank with a stench that turned his stomach, trailing from blackened flesh and gnawed bones. Blind white holes instead of eyes, some writhing with sea worms and... things.

Um. Those aren't spirits.

And they didn't look much like *talking*.

Chapter 74

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Saoluan warmed night-chilled hands by the little room lantern, deliberately not glancing to her right, where her little brother perched cross-legged on the top bunk. Let him stare out the window. It probably made him feel better. Spirits knew it made her feel better, having twenty feet of open air under the window. A lot of Dragons' Wings was taking the same approach; building up, leaving only the stuff you could do without on the ground floor. The drowned might one day be put to rest, but storm surge and tsunamis were going to be a fact of life. "Hey. String of coppers for your thoughts."

"Doubt they'd be worth that much."

Ooof. Someone was too depressed to even throw a good tantrum. "Is this about that whole *yāorén aren't human* thing?" Saoluan slid a smile his way. "Because Shidan was pretty good company, once you got past that *humans are so weird* attitude." She let some of the poking-fun fade from her grin. "You know it's okay, right? You're still my little brother."

"It's not that." Langxue wrapped his arms around himself, eyes cast down in thought. "I forgot. Who I was, who I am - they get all mixed up in my head sometimes. I had to see Aang airbending before I realized, before I could remember..." He shifted his shoulders, and fell silent.

"Think out loud," Saoluan suggested. "I'm awful at guessing what people think." She grinned, and jiggled her bosom. "Unless it's a guy staring at my girls. Then it's pretty obvious."

Langxue grumbled something under his breath that sounded like *Zuko*.

"No fair," Saoluan pouted. "He doesn't even notice my girls."

"Guanyin's mercy for small favors," Langxue muttered. "He notices how you hack things into tiny bits, trust me." He knuckled his forehead. "It's not that. Not exactly. Well, I guess part of it's that-" He stopped, and sighed, and started over. "I had to see Aang airbend before I remembered there was a difference. The Avatar bends like any human bender. Just - a lot more powerful."

Saoluan touched the warm metal framing lantern glass. "But *yāorén* don't."

"*Yāorén* aren't really like the Avatar," Langxue said reluctantly. "The Great Spirits were creating us a long time before the World Spirit decided to be human." One hand let go, tapped on the edge of his bed. "It's like the kelp forests near Kyoshi Island had a boat run aground in them, and got ticked off about it."

Which had been known to happen. "Yeah?" Saoluan asked. Oh. *Oh*. "You mean like the old story about the *ama*, the paua shell divers..."

"*Comb out my strands, and mend what you have done, and never trespass again,*" Langxue quoted the old spirit-tale. "*Defy me, and the sea itself will rise and strangle you. But keep to your bargain, little diver-girl, and I shall give you strength to match your courage, and the power to brave the dark waters.*" He shrugged. "That's what *yāorén* are. We can see the spirits. We touch them. But we're divers holding our breath. We've only got so much air."

Saoluan flinched, remembering the rest of the story. It wasn't a happy tale, even if it had a good

ending. "But you can't leave the sea, either. And everything tastes like salt."

Langxue nodded, short and choppy. "The Avatar... it's like that old story of the raven-wolf who gets himself born as the son of a chieftain's daughter, so he can steal the stars. He is a human bender. He's also a spirit. He's not a crack in the world; he's part of both of them."

Saoluan whistled. "General Iroh thinks you're like the Avatar, only watered down for the lightweights. But you're not."

"Good thing, too," Langxue said dryly. "One bender with the power of a Great Spirit is enough for the world to deal with..." His voice trailed off, as he stared out the window. "Something's wrong."

She felt it then; like a silent, chilling rush of wind. The night was suddenly darker.

"No way," Langxue croaked, pale as milk. "Zuko said... but nobody's that stupid, oh *hell*..."

A gong clanged in the night, rung in measured sets of three that sent panic like ice down Saoluan's spine.

Harbor fires out. Harbor fires out. Harbor fires out-!

Zombies, Aang thought, frozen to the sand as *things* lurched forward. *Like Sokka and the pentapox, only they're really really dead, that's so gross...*

Dead, and coming his way. That couldn't be good-

The one reaching for him had skin sliding off like a black glove. It was going to touch him...

Squicked beyond even a teenage male's tolerance for ickiness, Aang seized water with both hands and *shoved*.

Ice crackled out over the harbor, wriggling fingers lurching to a frozen halt.

Heart beating fast, Aang drew in a relieved breath. Nothing like a foot of ice to stop anything short of a rampaging saber-moose lion-

Choked, and backed off coughing, trying to spit out a horrible taste of salt and decayed flesh. Ugh. Oh man, how could other nations even *think* of eating meat, it all ended up like that in the end.

Eyes stinging, Aang thumped into metal armor. Froze. Turned, and looked up. Though not too far up.

Even without the skull-mask faceplate, Lieutenant Teruko's expression would have made a lion-dillo quail.

"Um... hi," Aang hazarded, pasting on a smile. "Nice night?"

Teruko's eyes narrowed.

Oh, come on. "Look, I can explain everything-"

"I don't want an explanation."

Zuko's voice. Zuko's very tired voice; which didn't make sense, the last message Toph and Sokka had passed up to the Temple said Zuko had been tired enough to sleep during the day. And

shouldn't a firebender still be asleep now? If anybody could sleep, with that gong going off.

But it was Zuko, with a bunch of other firebenders, and Toph and Sokka prying their eyes open not far behind. Sokka rolled his eyes at Zuko, winked at Aang, and looked behind him-

Stopped dead, jaw dropping as he pointed. "Drowned - you - what the heck?"

"Frozen. I suppose that works. For now." Zuko crossed his arms, face set and cold. "It should hold them long enough to get the fires started again. If not... Lieutenant, you'd better send someone to get my uncle. Plan out which bodies need to be incinerated first if any start breaking loose."

"Sir," Teruko nodded. Gestured to one of the others in armor. "Corporal Shoni."

"Ma'am." The marine faded into the shadows of the street.

Why was everybody ignoring him? "I heard there were angry spirits in the water," Aang started, "and I-"

"I *do not want to hear it*." Pale gold bored into him, cold and weirdly somewhere beyond anger. "I don't want your reasons. I don't want your excuses. I don't want your explanations. All I want to know is, what did you *do*?"

Why was that level tone so utterly scary?

Sokka stifled a groan. "Katara never finished telling you about the drowned, did she?"

Toph wrinkled her nose. "I'm gonna guess that was important."

"Yeah," Sokka sighed. "It was."

Zuko's expression didn't change. At all.

Which made that creepy feeling tickling Aang's neck get even stronger. That was not what was supposed to happen. If something that went wrong was somebody else's fault, you were supposed to get mad at *them*.

Except Zuko wasn't a Temple Elder. As far as Aang could tell, the firebender had given up on whose *fault* something was, whether it was an army on his doorstep or Azula dropping in on Ba Sing Se. Zuko was only looking for whose responsibility it was to *fix* it.

But I did fix it! They're frozen. That stopped them, right?

"I'm going to assume you know absolutely nothing," Zuko said, still eerily calm. "I thought, after what Teo and his people saw happen here, that they would have told you not to put the harbor fires out. I thought that Katara, who's so sure the Water Tribes understand the Ocean better than anyone else, would have at least *mentioned* what can happen to someone who drowns when a spirit goes crazy." He shrugged. "Apparently I was wrong. Though she must have told you something, or you wouldn't have come down here alone, *without her*, to bend our harbor."

"She wouldn't tell me why not!" Aang shot back, stung. That sounded like Zuko thought he'd *lied* to Katara. And he hadn't! He just hadn't told her where he was going. Like she hadn't told him why not to bend the water. That was fair, right? "All I wanted to do was find out why. What's wrong with the sea here? What did you do to get all these spirits angry at people-"

Pale gold narrowed. "They are *not spirits*."

...Oh. Uh-oh.

Toph latched onto Sokka's sleeve. "You might want to move back a bit."

Sokka shook his head. "This is my fault. I trusted Katara."

"Right. You trusted Sugar Queen to tell Twinkletoes something he didn't want to hear?" Toph said sourly.

"Yeah." Sokka grimaced. "Bad move."

"What didn't she tell me?" Aang demanded, frustrated. "How can I fix things with spirits, or - or ghosts, if nobody tells me anything?"

"We would have told you." Zuko's gaze bored into him. "If you'd *asked*."

Aang shook his head; no way. "If Katara wouldn't tell me, why would you?"

"Because we *live* here," Zuko gritted out. "We've already got a cranky volcano under our feet. You think we need you waking anything else up? And whether or not you thought we'd tell you anything - we live here! And you went to bend somewhere Teo and Katara *told you* not to? This is *my* domain. You and your allies are supposed to be here as *guests*. Guests *ask* their hosts before they charge into a dragon's cave. But did you? No! You come sneaking in like a *thief*, just to poke something you know could be dangerous. And you don't have the decency the spirits gave a rattle-viper, to warn us first! Where the hell are your *manners*?"

"You have zombies lurching out of the ocean, and you're worried about my manners?" Aang said in disbelief.

"We can *deal* with the drowned," Zuko bit out. "We've done it before. And between us and Asagitatsu, we had them *quiet*. Until you decided you just *had* to poke a problem that we had *under control*. Because you're the Avatar, you're the answer to everyone's prayers, you're going to fix the world. You can't be bothered with boring little *details* like talking to the people *who live here*! So yes, I am! Because you put my people in danger - you put *everyone* in danger - when you jump straight into the middle of a spirit-mess assuming everything wrong is the *humans'* fault! And if it was just spirits, that'd be a disaster - but no, you've got to push right over the edge into *catastrophe*, because you do it with everything! See problem! Airbend at problem! Lie to people to make the problems just hide for a while, never mind what happens when you're gone! You are a flying, chattering *menace*! You jumped in up to your neck with Fong, you jumped in up to *our* necks here, and Agni only knows what boiling tar-pits you're going to jump into next, because you never bother asking *what's going on*!" Fire sparked off his knuckles as Zuko clenched and unclenched his fists. "You are the Avatar. You are *supposed* to mediate between humans and the spirits. The spirits *require* anybody who deals with them to be careful, cunning, and above all, *polite*." A deep, snarling breath. "You - you- *What the hell is wrong with you?*"

"I'm going to walk out on a ledge here," Toph put in bluntly. "Is this why Sozin could talk you guys into burning out temples?"

Whoa, what? Aang stiffened. That sounded like Toph thought part of the war might have been the Air Nomads' fault!

"Oh, no," Zuko said grimly. "No. I have... records, of Byakko dealing with Master Gyatso. He didn't fly into someone's territory without asking if he could stick around. He didn't swirl up windstorms near the crops. He didn't *put out memorial flames*." A steaming breath. "No. This isn't

an Air Nomad thing. Though I'm guessing he's used that line on all of you. Why do something boring like *behave* when he can just fly in, do whatever he feels like, and fly back out while someone else cleans up the mess? You spoiled little self-indulgent *idiot*-" Zuko cut himself off with a slash of his hand. "Small words. I am going to use *very* small words. And you are going to listen. And then you are going to open that glider and go back up the mountain, and not go near the water again without finding *me* first."

"Or what?" Aang challenged. "Like you said. *I'm* the Avatar."

"Aang?" Sokka was looking up. Way up. "I... think you'd better look behind you."

Hot wind. Like ashes from a firestorm. Or... something very big, breathing silent and strong.

Wary, Aang looked.

You trespass.

A curling shape of scales and flames, blue and green and crimson. Large enough to be here and above the cone at once, glowing eyes weighing him like razor-edged scales.

You trespass, Avatar. The third time.

Once you came in storms, maddened and slaying. And I slew you. Again you came, allowing humans to drive my dragons away. And I slew you. Again you come. And my dragon-child bids me not to slay you. Teeth of fiery sparks gleamed in the night; a struck-match taste of sulfur bit Aang's tongue. You trespass.

"She wants to erupt, you know," Zuko said, into that hot silence. "She's angry, and she's hungry, and she *wants* someone to pay for neglecting her. You're the Avatar. Like Kesuk was. Like Yangchen was. *Spirits can't tell us apart.*"

Aang swallowed, throat dry. "But..."

"And that, is why you have to be polite to spirits. Always," Zuko said coldly. "Because you have no idea who they've dealt with last. Or what that human did to them. Or *didn't* do. When you deal with a spirit, *Avatar Aang*, you get the consequences of everything *every* other human has done to *tick. Them. Off.*" Another long, slow breath. "And that's what you pulled up tonight. The drowned aren't spirits. They're *restless dead*. And they're restless because they were *killed* by a spirit. Something they couldn't run from, and couldn't fight. Which means they died hating... and that hate lets *something else* use them. Whether they like it or not. That hate puts those ghosts and those bodies in the hands of a Great Spirit. One who hates all humankind for the horrible crime of *existing.*"

"But," Aang protested, still not able to look away from those glowing, fire-smoke eyes, "the Great Spirits *help* us..."

"Do they? Do all of them?" Zuko snorted. "You know there's one who doesn't. And he's the one who holds the drowned. Like he can hold *all* the unhallowed dead. The Face-Stealer."

"You mean K-" Aang gulped, and cut himself off. Spirits' names got their attention, Tao had said. If anything Zuko was saying was true... that would be bad.

"At least someone taught you that much," Zuko said grimly. "So. Small words. The ocean here is dangerous. Do not bend it. Do *not* put out the flames. And the next time someone tells you something is dangerous, *ask why.*" He shook his head, slow and angry. "And if they won't tell you,

find *someone else* to ask. Before you bring something like *that*-" he jerked his head toward iced bodies, slipping back under the waves "-down on some poor damn innocent people who actually *believe* in you."

Chapter End Notes

Sad thing here is that Aang was actually trying to do something responsible. And failed. Badly.

On his side, Zuko is tired. And cranky. And he just got a jolt of pure adrenaline to an already overloaded system. He is no mood to be nice or charitable, much less fair.

Poor Communication Kills, indeed.

...And Aang dealing with zombies? He's the Avatar. Getting two armies to stop killing each other? Hard. Tackling a bunch of "monsters" he doesn't have to worry about killing? Easy.

Chapter 75

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"For you are crunchy, and taste good with hot sauce," Sokka muttered to himself, perched on the dock warehouse roof where he could just make out the fire-tower in the faint light before dawn. Ordinarily he'd be dead to the world right now, and glad of it. But after seeing Aang off last night, which had been a short but very intense ordeal of *yes, I think the volcano means it-*

Yeah. Sleep had been kind of hard to come by.

Sokka leaned on the low wall edging the roof; a wall that made so much more sense when you knew dead bodies might come lurching up out of the water bent on mayhem.

Like Zuko makes more sense when you know he's spent his whole life with people trying to kill him, Sokka reflected. Like the Fire Nation makes more sense when you think about people who love fire and sharp pointy things getting run over by a swarm of Aangs.

It still hurt, understanding that. He'd walk through fire for Aang. He already *had*. Aang was a friend. And when Aang thought about what he was doing, and Aang was *trying*, he could be a really good guy. Better than Sokka thought he was, sometimes. Aang could forgive things. And people.

Not me, Sokka admitted. *I can let things go, sure. But it's not the same.* He frowned, something in that thought and the morning chill tweaking a memory. Something about spirits, that had hit him while he was really hoping a volcano-spirit wasn't looking for Avatar-munchies...

The faint steam from the cone was white as Gran-Gran's hair.

"Spirits don't forgive," Sokka said in a rush, remembering one of Gran-Gran's winter tales. "They can forget, but they never forgive. People can change. Spirits are what they *are*."

He slapped himself in the forehead.

Augh. Aang's got it all backwards. He thinks Hei Bai forgave the villagers, once he showed the big orca-bear... thing the acorn was sprouting.

And that's not what happened.

If Hei Bai was the forest spirit - yeah, he was mad because humans burned the forest down. Then Aang showed him it was coming back. So he turned everybody loose. Because he forgot. Because the forest was growing again, and that means happy forest spirits, and happy spirits don't kidnap people. Usually.

Kicking against the inside edge of the wall, Sokka sighed. "The Painted Lady didn't forgive Katara. She just got what she needed to get to stop taking revenge. Temul didn't forgive the Avatar; she just took something he cared about out from under him, so she could *get* revenge. Which means the Face-Stealer's not going to forgive people, either. Ouch." And... this was going to be nasty. Aang wanted people to forgive each other and be friends. Koh not only wouldn't forgive humans, he *couldn't*.

So how do we get Koh into a spot where he's a happy Face-Stealer, instead of a kill-all-humans

one? Sokka wondered. *Huh. Tricky. If he thinks the World Spirit's his... um, dad or something, and humans-*

Thought screeched to a terrified halt.

Humans killed the Avatar. Even if that Avatar deserved it - she had the World Spirit in her. It'd take a lot to forget something like that.

Oooh, and now Sokka felt queasy in a way that had nothing to do with those weird little shellfish-spider critters he'd snacked on last night. Even if they had still been twitching when he scooped them out of the pot.

Humans killed the Avatar. What the heck do we do if Koh's not in this on his own?

Between what people in Dragons' Wings had let drop after their patron spirit had showed up, and what Temul's memories had left him about the Four Deaths, the volcanoes dragons kept happy so they wouldn't bury the world in freezing ash - the fact that Asagitatsu hadn't gone off already was a small miracle. And the only reason she wasn't going off was because Zuko had planted himself here, laying his own life on the line to wrestle with a volcano.

And Zuko wouldn't be here if he hadn't been exiled, Sokka knew. And definitely not here if he hadn't chased Aang across the world before that whole mess in Ba Sing Se. And Aang wouldn't have been there to chase if Katara hadn't lost her temper under the midnight sun in an ice field, and that was...

Midnight sun. Agni.

Spirits lump dragons and humans together, Sokka realized. If Agni wants dragons to live, humans have to survive. Agni's got just as much riding on getting Koh's head back on straight as we do.

Agni did. What about the World Spirit?

...Oh, monkey-feathers.

Damn it, he could *not* see a downside to Koh's plot. Not from the World Spirit's point of view. Humans got wiped out? Then the World Spirit just wouldn't incarnate anymore. So what? Without humans around, there wouldn't be anyone the Avatar needed to mediate with the spirit world *for*. Humans managed to pull off a last-minute save and cool Koh off? Again, so what? Then the World Spirit would just keep on keeping on; and the Avatar would die, and return, and die, and return. Any way you sliced it, the World Spirit didn't have a polar dog in this fight. Heck, it was gaining from this. The humans who'd killed it were going through hell, and it could just sit back and *watch*.

And for a hundred years... that was *exactly* what it'd done.

Oh hell. Sokka swallowed hard. *It fits.*

Everything Temul had said, about people's lives getting worn away too soon. Everything that had gone wrong in the world over the last few centuries. Why the Avatar had just up and vanished *in a storm*, when weather-spirits should have steered clear of doing anything worse than nipping him with frost.

The World Spirit's got an axe to grind. How the heck do we fix that?

He didn't know. For once in his life, there were no shiny ideas, no neat plans put together with sinew twine and sticky-gum; and even though the sea was only an airbender's jump below him,

breathing felt like the air was as thin as where clouds scraped the sky...

Do the hard stuff first, Sokka reminded himself; ducking his head, making sure he slowed down his breathing no matter how much he wanted to panic. Count five in, hold two, count five out. Dad, Piandao, Temul; all different as night and day, but they'd all thumped him to *stay calm*. Because in the middle of a fight panic didn't just kill you, it killed the guy next *to* you - and if a chief's son or a great name panicked, everybody in the *whole tribe* was next to you.

Hard stuff first. Impossible stuff later.

A touch of sulfur came to his nose, and Sokka eyed the cone. "There's some of the hard stuff. How do we fix it so the volcano-dragon forgets Avatars being stupid... damn. Damn, I don't think we've got the time. Meaning we really, really need to get off this rock." He swallowed hard. "Gran-Gran, I wish you were here. Aang could really use your stories."

"I wish she was, too." A whispering chuckle, like the crackle of a match. "She sounds like a remarkable woman."

Ack - sword - block-!

Temul held up a translucent hand. "Rest easy, young man. This isn't the Fire Nation; not quite. I do have limits."

Oh. Whew. Though oddly, that made him even more worried. "Is something wrong?" Sokka asked, stepping closer. "Shu Jing? Master Piandao? The Fire Lord?" *Oh, man*. "Did Aang wake something else up?"

"Not that I know of," Temul said dryly. "Though the spirit here is more than cranky enough. Fortunate I'm not tampering with one of hers; she *probably* won't bother me. Which may be how her dragons were driven away the first time; she wasn't bothered. Until she was." The ghost drew a cooling breath. "My adoptive son's going to get himself in hot water again playing with flowers, but that's his nature. And Shu Jing holds well; you'd know that, if you only let yourself listen."

Oh, hell no. Spooky spirit stuff was Aang's job, not his. And if he kept telling himself that, maybe he'd believe it. "So it's the Fire Lord," Sokka decided. And there wasn't much time before sunrise. "What can you tell me?"

"Rumors," Temul said succinctly. "Some say Princess Azula vanished from the capital on the very day of the eclipse. You can guess whose flyaway feet Ozai throws that charge at. But some say she didn't go alone. That she had allies, and a plan." Pale gold was deadly serious. "I think you know, Azula with a plan is more deadly than a poisoned blade."

"Kind of figured that out," Sokka muttered. "How'd Zuko last this long?"

"Fast feet. And he's too stubborn to die," the ghost said dryly. "Kin against kin is like fighting a darkened mirror. Even if you win, you'll bleed. Who can bleed longest; that's the question."

Yeah... wait. "Are we still talking about Zuko and Azula?"

"Are we?" Snarling under her breath, Temul stared up toward the Temple. "I could cheerfully tattoo the rest of his hide what for what he's done. For what he is, and what he'd teach any children trusted to his care. But for one spirit with too many legs, he might be what you need. If he'll *think*."

That was interesting. A little hair-raising, given the Fire Nation tended to reserve tattoos for people of an incurably criminal nature, but interesting. Sokka glanced away, toward the mountains. Still

couldn't see the Temple from here, but maybe things weren't as bad as he thought.

Grinning, he turned back toward a cranky ghost. "If you think there's something okay about Aang, we're really in trouble-"

Only sunlight remained.

"You know," Toph circled her hands, shoving hot sand back across the training ground toward Zuko, "Twinkletoes was trying to figure stuff out on his own. Not all his fault it went smooosh." She fanned her fingers, splitting the red-hot lump into three streams he had to fight to heat up again. "Nobody gets to be good without really messing up sometimes."

"I know," Zuko sighed, trying not to bite the words out. They were borrowing a corner of the marines' training ground to work; which had the advantage of keeping him under eyes Lieutenant Teruko trusted, while still allowing enough distance that he could talk to the Blind Bandit without too many listening ears. He needed that right now. "But when you and I screw up, we try to make smaller messes. One fire. One big rock." He breathed out, stifling a snarl. "He put out the *whole harbor*."

"Aang's got a problem with thinking small," Toph agreed, swooping sand back his way smooth as a flight of manta rays in the surf. "Guess when you're the Avatar, you've got plenty of chi to burn."

Zuko deflected the hot lump with a push. "If he tries to do the same thing firebending he does with everything else, he's going to wind up flat on his back, wondering where all the pretty lights came from. Fire doesn't forgive. Turn your back on it, and it'll sear everything you have." He glanced at Toph's toes, trying to read what move she'd make next. Her earthbending didn't use the same forms as the rest of the Earth Kingdom, which caught him off guard more times than he liked to think about. But if you paid attention to those dirty feet - Toph stepped *precisely*. A flex of her toes was often the best clue as to what she'd try to bend next.

"What I don't understand is *why*," Zuko went on, still tamping down smoldering aggravation. "He bends like he's trying to make the biggest, flashiest *come kill me* sign for the whole Fire Nation. What's the point? He's the *Avatar*. Anybody who knows that, knows he can break a whole mountain in half. Anybody who doesn't... the fewer people who know who he is, the fewer flaming boulders he's got to dodge. Why does he do it?"

Toph let her arms fall to her sides, almost dropping red-hot sand on his feet before Zuko sidestepped it. Clapped her hands in front of her chest, and fluttered her eyelashes the way Jia would at a boy about to be sunk in quicksand up to his knees. "Oh Aang! That was so awesome! You're such a *powerful* bender. Did I ever tell you a fortuneteller said I was going to marry a powerful bender?"

"Stop," Zuko managed, stomach already lurching from the cloying sugar in her voice. "Please."

Toph smirked at him, back to her normal smug tone. "Did her good, huh?"

"Urgh," Zuko agreed, still nauseated. "Seriously? You think he's trying to impress Katara? Why?"

Toph crossed her arms. "There's something really weird about me having to tell you that, Sparky. You've got eyes. And people keep telling me she's pretty."

Zuko shook his head in disbelief, feeling sand's heat radiate to his toes. "Mai is pretty. Ty Lee is pretty. My *sister* is pretty."

"Okay, maybe sometimes eyes don't help," Toph allowed. "Come on. You never tried to show off for somebody you wanted to like you?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her no, never, fire was dangerous-

But Zuko winced, and gave her the truth. "Not with bending."

Even now, he could feel the scar throb.

Toph drew back a little. "You messed up bad, huh?"

"Pretty bad," Zuko admitted. He'd gone over that council meeting a thousand times in his head. What he might have done. What he might have said. What he might have seen, if only he'd known to look.

But I didn't know. And Father... Ozai saw a way to get rid of the heir he didn't want anymore.

Zuko shoved that old ache back, breathing in salt air. "Trying to save the world, and he's thinking about pretty girls. Too bad Uncle didn't have *him* on a ship for three years." And he was not going to get mad at that, not if he could help it. When the world had fallen apart around him, he'd grabbed onto anything that seemed solid. Katara might be bad news for him, but she'd been there for Aang, solid as a glacier.

Aang needs something to hang onto. The rest of his world is gone. Great-grandfather killed it.

If someone had killed Uncle Iroh right after he'd been exiled...

I'd have fallen apart. There wouldn't be anything left.

A dust-ball smacked him in the chest. "Sad thoughts. Quit that," Toph said firmly.

"Trying," Zuko sighed. "I can't dump him somewhere safe to grow up. He wouldn't stay put." He lit a flame in his palm, staring into it as if he could find answers in the fire. "The Avatar's not supposed to be told until he's sixteen. If Aang was still with Master Gyatso..."

"Kind of not an option." Toph scraped her foot on the ground, sand curling in a wave to follow it. "And he still needs a firebending master. Somebody he'll listen to. He's not real good with that."

Zuko grimaced, dousing the flame. "I know. He doesn't listen to Fire Nation people, and sometimes we just want to bite him-"

"He's not good at listening," Toph cut him off. "To anybody. It's not just flamey guys. I had to throw boulders at him and let him face down a saber-moose lion before he figured out there was no trick to earthbending. There's just you, stubborn, and the rock." She drew the sand into a whirling hoop, fingering it like she'd just thought of something evil to do with it. "Sokka says Roku told Aang mastering the elements took a lifetime, but he had to do it *faster*. And he could do it, because the Avatar's done it before."

...Of *course*. He'd been waiting for the next disaster to avalanche onto his head. "You mean, Roku told him it didn't matter what he did, he'd pull off a miracle," Zuko said heavily. "Because he's the Avatar, and the Avatar Spirit *knows all this already*." He buried his face in his hands. Too much. It was just too much, and it explained everything that had gone wrong so horribly well.

The Avatar Spirit knows bending. Of course it does; it's the spirit of the whole world! But Aang's not the Avatar Spirit. He's a human being, and he doesn't know something until he learns it

himself.

Only Roku had told Aang he already knew. Which was exactly what a twelve-year-old trapped in a world trying to kill him wanted to believe.

Just look at the messes you got into when you were his age, Zuko told himself. And you had plenty of people telling you that you didn't know everything.

Sand shushed down to the ground, and quiet steps brought Toph in reach to prod his elbow.

"Sparky?"

"Roku. Is. An idiot," Zuko managed.

Another jab at his funnybone. "Hey. That's Great-Grandpa Idiot to you."

"Which explains so much about my family," Zuko mumbled through his fingers. "What the hell was Azulon thinking? What was Sozin thinking? Were they crazy?"

"Um." Toph's voice dripped *this is obvious*. "Fire Lord Sozin. Out to conquer the whole world. The word *duh* mean anything to you?"

Okay, maybe he'd deserved that one.

"So Roku could have thought through what he said a little better," the earthbender went on. "We've still got the same problem. Aang needs a firebending teacher. If you want to get him off the volcano, you've got to help him find one. I'm guessing you can't do it. You, Katara, Aang, the same training ground - could get messy. What about Uncle?"

"Bad idea." Zuko lifted his head. "Uncle Iroh has promises to keep. They might not be good for Aang. They definitely wouldn't be good for teaching somebody. You have to trust your teacher. You have to put your spirit into your bending, and know the master watching over you won't fireball you the minute you turn your back." He groped for the right words. "Uncle wouldn't hurt him. Physically. And that's wrong, too. Fire burns. You have to know that. But when you bend, your spirit's wide open. You *have* to trust your teacher."

"So we need a flamey guy who can trust Aang to trust him." Toph looked like she'd bitten into a raw limon. "Great."

"And we need someone Aang will listen to," Zuko added, thinking hard. Reaching reluctantly back to memories of a man who'd known Aang, and watched him listen to... "We need an Elder."

"Kind of thin on the ground," Toph said wryly.

"We need someone *like* an Elder," Zuko amended. "Someone who's been officially recognized as a firebending master. As a teacher. Someone who has the right to be teaching Aang, without running right up against the Avatar's own decree. Someone like..."

Yeah. That might just work.

"I have an idea."

"So I made the drowned." Aang leaned against Appa's side, looking out into the shreds of windswept cloud between the Temple and the next mountain. "Why would the Ocean do something so horrible? We had to stop the Fire Navy, but - storms kill people all the time. Why did

sinking the fleet make such a big problem?"

Katara tucked her hair a little closer around her ears. The wind felt so cold when he talked about spirits. "Storms can make drowned, too. Sometimes." She glanced around the courtyard, watching Teo's friends practice wind control with bright orange paper gliders. "Gran-Gran says it's not what the spirits do that make a drowned. It's the person who chooses to fight the ocean. If they accepted that the sea has a right to take them, it wouldn't happen. It's not your fault."

Pushing some of Appa's fur away from his face, Aang looked at her with wide eyes. "How can somebody not fight when they're drowning?"

"When you know it's your time." Katara tried not to frown. Her heart ached. Kids hated understanding this. And sometimes, Aang still was a kid. "Our strength comes from the Ocean. He has the right to take it back."

"Um... pretty sure airbenders' strength doesn't." Aang scratched the back of his head. "And we know firebenders' doesn't. So how can they not fight?"

That was a creepy thought. "The Ocean's a great spirit," Katara said firmly. "People ought to accept that, no matter what nation they are."

Aang crossed his arms, glancing seaward. "So if Agni used a volcano to wipe out the Northern Water Tribe, they shouldn't fight that, either."

"What? No!" Katara planted her hands on her hips. "What is wrong with you? You did what you had to, to stop the invasion-"

"Maybe I don't like that nobody told me what would happen!" Aang burst out. "You knew what the drowned were. All of you knew about it! But nobody told me." He shuddered, turning away. "You knew what would happen. And you let me do it. How's that different from what Fong wanted me to do? How is it *any* different?"

"Maybe because none of us *let* you do it?" Katara snapped back, finally pushed past patience. "The Moon was dead, and your eyes glowed, and the Ocean's glowed back, and you were gone. You were *gone*, Aang! The pool swallowed you whole, and we had no idea what was happening! Let you? How could we *stop* you?"

"You wouldn't have wanted to stop me-"

"Yes, I would have!"

The courtyard was suddenly very, very quiet.

"I hate the Fire Nation." Katara tried to keep how much out of her voice, deliberately not looking toward listening ears. "I'm glad they died. But I would have stopped you if I could! Not because of them. Because of you!"

"But you didn't tell me." Aang's shoulders hunched down, as if he wanted to bury himself in warm fur.

"I didn't want you to be hurt." Katara winced. "You've been hurt enough already."

"But Zuko's people could have-"

"Zuko knows what's in the water, and he's here anyway," Katara cut him off. "If people get hurt,

I'm sorry. But they made their own choices." She swallowed. "Like Hama did. Sometimes... people don't want to be saved."

Now Aang looked at her. "Zuko isn't like Hama."

You saw what he did to Fong. But Aang seemed ready to forgive that. She couldn't see how. "No. He could be worse. He thinks he's doing the right thing. Just like Fire Lord Sozin did."

"And Kyoshi," Aang muttered.

Katara tried to wave that off. "That's not the same."

"How do I know?" Aang stared at her, pale and sad. "How does anybody *know* what's right?"

"Stopping the Fire Lord is the right thing to do," Katara insisted. "The war is wrong!"

"If stopping the Fire Lord means killing people like I did at the North Pole," Aang swallowed, "I won't do it. It'd be horrible. It'd be *wrong*."

Katara took a step back. "More horrible than what Ozai's going to do?"

"I don't know what Ozai's going to do!" Aang's fists were white-knuckled. "I just know what *I'm* going to do. And I'm not doing that. Not again. I've got to find another way!" He shook his head. "I've got to learn firebending."

Katara gave him a skeptical glance. "From someone here?"

"No," Sokka's voice broke in. "Not someone here."

Katara stiffened. Turned. That glimpse of green better not be what she thought it was. "Toph! You shouldn't be up here!" Much, much better to get upset about that than the scarred, scowling figure in red beside her.

"Eh, I came up the slow way," Toph waved it off. "Should be fine for a few hours." She jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "Sparky's got something you need to hear."

"You need to find a firebending teacher." Zuko took the seat Teo had grudgingly offered him, watching Aang and his friends sit and slouch over other chairs and benches in one of the Mechanist's idle workrooms. Better if they were all sitting down for this. And much, much better to have this conversation inside, away from the wind and any large streams of snowmelt. "And it can't be here. Asagitatsu's cranky enough as it is. We're trying to empty a lagoon with spoons, and any time you bend near her she puffs up more steam."

"That's not--"

"It doesn't matter whose fault that is." Zuko let himself glance at Katara, no more. Staring would set her off; avoiding her gaze would imply he was afraid of her, and he'd already seen how much mercy the waterbender had for her enemies. "Right now, you should remember that one of the things that's kept you alive this long is you've always been moving targets. So keep moving. If you stay here, Fire Lord Ozai has most of the people he wants dead wrapped up like a solstice present. Move, and he has to throw forces in at least two different directions. That will slow him down. And we all need as much time as we can get." He met gray eyes. "You need to learn firebending? Then get moving. There's no one here who can teach you."

"You mean, no one who will," Aang argued.

"I mean no one who can," Zuko said flatly. "The civilians we've picked up have barely any training at all. *Suzuran's* crew? Right now they're shielded from spirit malice - *mostly* - because they're following Captain Jee, he's following me, and I'm an exile. You're a declared enemy of the Fire Nation. If they tried to train you, they might as well stab themselves with hooks and troll for leopard-sharks. They'd live longer. Uncle Iroh? He's never been exiled. If he were to act directly against the Fire Lord, his brother... You're the spirit bridge. You figure it out." He shook his head. "Besides. Could you trust a teacher willing to turn against his own brother?"

"Yes," Aang answered, without a breath of hesitation. "The right thing is the right thing. It doesn't matter who you are."

"And there you have why I can't train you," Zuko said dryly, tapping on one arm of his chair. *One reason, anyway.* "I think you're crazy." He shrugged, before Katara could jump in with anything about who was the *real* crazy person in this room. "So. You need a firebending teacher who doesn't hate your guts, who you and your allies can trust, and who won't get in trouble for teaching the Avatar. Or at least someone who can't get into any *worse* trouble." He couldn't help but smirk. "I think it's kind of funny you haven't figured out who to look for. After all, he *only* risked his neck to help you talk to Roku. And escape."

Toph's brows had climbed into her bangs. "Seriously? There's a firebender who likes you guys? Why didn't you tell me about him before?"

"Um." Aang shifted uncomfortably on his bench. "Well... it's been months, and... we don't know what happened to him..."

Lie. "You saw Fire Sage Shiyu get taken by Zhao, just like I did," Zuko stated. "You were in the Fire Nation for weeks. Don't tell me you didn't ask..." He trailed off, as Sokka winced, and Katara looked away.

I don't believe this. I do not believe this. "You didn't ask," Zuko said flatly. "The man risked his life for you! Risked it *twice*, there's no way he could have helped you get into the sanctuary without breaking loyalty! And you didn't ask?"

"We were busy!" Aang flung back. "Trying to stop the Fire Lord! And... he... it was months ago. There wasn't anything we could do!"

"Busy?" Zuko echoed, still wondering if he was hearing right. "*Busy* is the komodo-rhinos' corral broke, we can't make smoke-sugar today. Busy isn't... you..." He was *not* going to set anything on fire. The Mechanists' people had tried to find all the natural gas leaks up here, but who knew what they might have missed. "You're out to *overthrow the Fire Lord* and you're too busy to find someone *who stuck his neck out to help?*"

Toph shifted on her bench, toes brushing the stone like she wanted to sink in and grab it. He couldn't blame her. Earth lived for debts and balance. This... well.

Sorry, Toph, Zuko thought, wishing he could wince without giving Katara ideas. *Aang doesn't honor debts. He doesn't even see they're there. You've got a bargain with someone who flies away from trouble, and there is nothing I can do about it.*

"It's not like his ashes would help us!" Katara flung at him.

Water Tribe barbarian. Which wasn't fair, Zuko knew that even when he thought it, but - she'd

been dragged all over the world, and she still didn't know things worked differently off the ice? "Shiyu is a *Fire Sage*. If Zhao didn't execute him on the spot for treason, he has rights. Including a *trial*. It's been long enough that he's probably *been* tried, sure. But he's a Fire Sage. And in case you missed the problem in our backyard-" He jerked a thumb back toward Dragons' Wings. "-we do not kill off *master-level firebenders* without a damn good reason. You can't threaten their relatives - who are probably *also* masters - to calm down a volcano if your captive's dead." *Breathe. Small words. It's not obvious; not to people who push their problems off of ice shelves.* "Odds are he's in *prison*. Not dead."

"Oh, prison!" Aang brightened. "I was in prison once. You meet some really neat people there."

That did not make sense. At all. "You? Were in prison? Where?" Zuko asked, incredulous. "Who could hold you?" Not that Zhao hadn't done a fair job of that in Pohuai Stronghold. But nobody sane was going to mistake that for a prison.

Sane. Remember who you're dealing with.

"They couldn't hold him." Katara cast a fondly exasperated look Aang's way. "He just wanted to stay there until we proved Avatar Kyoshi was innocent, so they'd stop burning Avatar statues."

"Which didn't work out so well," Sokka sighed. "She didn't kill him. But when she split Kyoshi Island off the mainland, Chin died. Kind of close enough."

Chin, burning the Avatar... aha. Though now it made even less sense. "You were in Chin Village, for Avatar Day," Zuko said numbly. "You know they boil people in oil there, right?" Uncle Iroh had gone into excruciating detail, specifically to hammer home that there were places so crazy even the Fire Army left them alone.

"That's what they said." Aang sounded a little less than sure. Then shrugged, and grinned. "But then their village got attacked by the Fire Nation, so they switched it to community service."

Zuko stared at him.

"What?"

He cannot be that dense... oh hell, yes, he can. Zuko took a deep breath. Funny how it didn't seem to calm him down. "You know," he emphasized, "they *boil people in oil* there."

"They had that on their wheel, sure," Aang nodded. "But they knew they couldn't do that to me. I'm the Avatar. They were just trying to scare us." Gray eyes were surprisingly sober. "They were still angry about Chin. Now they won't be."

"And that will make the next person they boil feel *so much better*." Zuko bit off the rest of his words, not trusting himself to say more. What was it like, being blithely confident that you never had to answer to the law unless you wanted to?

"There won't be a next person." Aang leaned forward, determined. "They were angry at the Avatar. Now they're not. People can change."

Usually they have to be dragged headfirst through a fire, first. Zuko didn't look away. "Do your friends a favor. If we're alive a year from now, go back to Chin Village. See if they're still using that wheel."

"They aren't!"

"Then it doesn't cost you anything to check, does it?" *Not solving the problem*, Zuko told himself grudgingly. Agni only knew he wanted to hammer the Avatar with what it did to people when someone made it so the law wasn't the *law*, but only what some idealistic idiot decided was right.

But now is not the time.

"If Fire Sage Shiyu's alive, he's in prison," Zuko stated. "Probably one of a few specific prisons; you can't hold a master firebender just anywhere, even with chi-blockers. Think Pohuai Stronghold. Only that was a fortress. Prisons are designed to keep benders from breaking out, or anyone else from breaking in." He smirked a little. "I can give you information that will make it easier. Mai's uncle is a warden." Boiling Rock's warden, specifically. And Boiling Rock was a pretty good bet for where a treasonous Fire Sage would have ended up.

Though most of his information on Fire Nation prisons had come from Uncle Iroh, not Mai. Probably because Iroh had always worried his nephew would end up in one.

Be fair, Zuko told himself. *If the solstice had gone just a little worse, he'd have been right.*

"You think we should go chasing prisons through the Fire Nation in case we *might* find a Fire Sage who wants to help Aang." Katara gave him a look askance. "We don't have time!"

"Why not?" Zuko demanded. "Half the trouble you land in is because you don't think before you jump into a mess." *I should know*. It'd taken the Moon drowning him before he'd stopped jumping into trouble. Mostly. "Why not take some time?"

Aang took a deep breath, and finally looked serious. "Roku said I had to defeat the Fire Lord before the end of summer. Before Sozin's Comet came. Or there wouldn't be anything left to save."

Zuko stared at him. Glanced at Toph, who looked just as startled. It didn't make sense. It couldn't.

It's Aang. It damn well could.

"When-" Zuko cleared his throat, tried again. "When did Roku tell you that?"

"At the solstice." Aang gave him a stubborn look. "That's why I had to get to Roku's temple, even with you and Zhao and that whole blockade... um. You don't look so good."

"Probably because he doesn't feel so good," Toph stuck in, her own face a little green. "You said we had to beat the Fire Lord before *the end of summer*. I figured fine, sure; we don't beat him by then, the sea-storms start up again, and we're stuck twiddling our thumbs until winter kicks in. But beat him, or everything goes blooie? When were you gonna tell *me* this?"

"I just did!"

"Why didn't you tell my parents this?" Toph persisted. "Hi, I'm the Avatar, I need your daughter to be my earthbending teacher. That's the kind of thing you said. Not, hi, I'm the Avatar, and I need your daughter to teach me earthbending *so the world won't come to an end*. I dunno, Twinkletoes; which do *you* think might have gotten their attention?"

"You've known this since the solstice," Zuko stated. Trying to keep his voice even, when he felt like the end result of a komodo-rhino stampede. "You *knew* there was a deadline, and..." Months frittering his time away, poking his tattooed nose into anything that looked interesting. Weeks of letting the Dai Li stymie him in Ba Sing Se, when word the Avatar needed to *save the world* might at least have gotten Long Feng's attention. Time burned away like a midnight candle, when any sane person would have...

Would have what? Zuko asked himself, suddenly weary. *Big problems aren't for students, even if a twelve-year-old does have a master's arrows. They're for Elders. And there weren't any Elders left he trusted. Who could he tell? Who could you tell, if you knew the world was coming to an end?*

Uncle. Master Amaya. Grandfather. Agent Shirong. Captain Jee and his crew. The Wens. He'd been... heh. So *lucky*.

And that made him want to break out in a cold sweat. *He'd* been lucky. Compared to the Avatar. That wasn't *possible*.

...So maybe it isn't.

He kept forgetting. Everyone kept forgetting. Aang was the Avatar. But Aang wasn't the Avatar *Spirit*. And when you looked at luck and spirits' favor - oh yeah. The *Avatar* was lucky. Avoiding airbenders' harmonious accord. Surviving a hundred years in ice. Finding bending masters in a world torn by war. Evading pursuit by the entire Fire Navy and Army for months on end. The Avatar Spirit had had all *kinds* of luck.

But Aang lost his home. He lost his teacher. He lost his whole world. And he's almost lost everyone he has here, more than once.

Strip out being able to dance through the most deadly scenarios with a smile on his face, and Aang's luck *sucked*.

I have no luck. End of story. But if the world was going to end? I'd have people who could help. If it came down to it, I could tell Azula. She's crazy. But she wants to rule the world, not destroy it.

Technically, he'd already done that once. Whatever Koh and Makoto had originally had in mind for the Day of Black Sun, it would have been so much worse if Azula had attacked Aang directly-

Damn. Damn it, *that* was what he'd been missing when he'd talked to Toph yesterday, and Aang before that. And he'd forgotten he'd missed it, what with the *walking dead* in the middle of the night.

Makoto was in the Fire Nation during the invasion. Aang came here, which means a dragon had time to get here. But she's not here. Asagitatsu would know. Asagitatsu's last dragon; dark dragon or not. The volcano-spirit couldn't miss her.

What's more important than hunting Aang?

"Of course we knew!" Katara gave him a dark look. "But we had to keep moving. Because of you!"

Which left out that after the Siege of the North, he mostly *hadn't* been chasing them. Too busy surviving a whole fleet being drowned, cast up ashore, running from Azula... Zuko sighed. *No point in bringing that up now, is there?*

"We got this far." Sokka's shift of weight caught Zuko's eye; that was a swordsman loosening up, even if he didn't want to fight. "Airbending, waterbending, earthbending. And then we saw a chance that might have ended the war, if we'd pulled it off. We've had *half a year*. Do you really think you could have done any better?"

"Depends. On if I managed not to drop you all overboard." Zuko shook his head. "So this is why Roku doesn't care about you getting mixed up in the war. The Fire Sages have records that say Avatars aren't supposed to do that. Fighting the Avatar Spirit - if it kills someone, it can leave tainted ghosts. Restless ones." He met Aang's gaze. "Like the drowned."

The airbender winced. "Nobody told *me* -"

"Just... wait." Zuko knuckled his headache. Agni knew, he'd cheerfully dump Aang right back into the bay. But it was hard to hold together the same kind of burning fury, knowing Aang was so desperately *alone*. "You didn't know. I hear you. You *should* have known. And you should have asked. But Zhao had you backed against the ice, and desperate people do desperate things." He eyed Sokka. "And desperate people let other people do desperate things. Uncle tells me there *are* shamans at the North Pole. Lots of them. They would have known what it meant, sending the Avatar against the fleet."

Sokka looked away, definitely not happy. "Okay. Point."

"You don't believe that!" Katara challenged him.

"They were going to marry Yue to a guy she didn't even like, Sis. For *the good of her people*." Sokka shook his head. "You start saying things like that..." He stared at Zuko. "Where do you stop?"

"Ask my great-grandfather," Zuko nodded. "Fire Lord Sozin didn't stop."

Katara drew back, eyeing both of them like they'd spoken another language. "We're not like that!"

"You're *human beings*," Zuko shot back at her. "We're *all* like that. Water, Fire, Earth - it *doesn't matter*, Katara. We can all. Do. *Horrible*. Things. And we all tell ourselves afterward that we had to do them. That we didn't have any other options. But there's *always* another way." He looked at Aang. "Sometimes, there's just no choice we can live with."

Aang swallowed. "I couldn't have let Zhao destroy the Northern Water Tribe," he whispered. "I just... couldn't."

"Then you have to live with that." Zuko sighed. "And we all have to live with what the Face-Stealer stole from their deaths. He has a lot more power now. What he's going to do with it - I'm afraid to think about it." He rested his forehead against his knuckles, trying not to shiver. "I thought the war and the Face-Stealer were two different problems. If they're *not*..."

Then I have to do something. I don't want anything to do with the Avatar, but - I'm a yāorén. Like it or not. If I don't do something, the spirits are going to come looking for me. And my people.

I hate my life.

"The... he... what?" Aang paled. "That *helped* him?"

"I don't think helped is the right word." Zuko shuddered. "Professor Wen found some old tomes on the Face-Stealer. He's supposed to be part of the balance. Like the vulture-eagles. He swallows up corruption, so other spirits are purified. But there's never supposed to be this much of it. If death gets stronger than life... He's taking ghosts, to control the drowned, and who knows what else. He wants humans *dead*, and-"

Oh, Agni. It fit.

"And he's working with Makoto," Zuko grimaced. "The blue dragon. Who *didn't* follow you here."

Katara arched an eyebrow at him. "Because I tossed her in the ocean."

"I did that once, too. It didn't stick." Zuko shivered, trying not to remember black sand and deadly

water; Asagitatsu's claws all that stood between him and death. "She must have something more important to do. Something the Face-Stealer wants as part of his plans. Something... my father thinks is part of *his* plan."

And we don't know what it is. And we're out of time.

"Roku said you had to stop Ozai before the Comet," Zuko said quietly. "Makoto decided to let *wounded prey* get away rather than follow you. Put it together... whatever the Face-Stealer's plotting, it's going to crash down on us by the end of summer."

I don't want to do this. I want to do anything but this.

"You don't have time to find a Fire Sage on your own," Zuko stated, feeling each word like a death knell. "So I guess I have to come with you."

Chapter End Notes

Given the justice systems Katara's seen in canon, you can't really blame her for thinking there was nothing they could do to help Shiyu. Just look at a few examples: Chin Village, Ba Sing Se as it was run by Long Feng, and the Fire Nation school where Aang was threatened with being sent to the mines for misbehavior. That doesn't even count the nightmare of what happened to Hama. Katara's got every reason to believe Fire Nation "justice" is cruel, brutal, and fast. Zuko was raised to be one of the people dealing out justice - meaning he knows, in theory, how it's supposed to work. His exposure to the actual results has been... well, limited.

Chapter 76

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Father wants me dead." Azula said it half to herself, going over a map of the northern half of the world yet another time. The sun was warm, but the wind off the sea was strong enough to make her glad of the stone walls human hands had added to their cliff-carved sanctuary. Her Dai Li were combing the island for any earthbound dangers, and Ty Lee's onmitsu were watching the skies. She ought to feel safe. She didn't. "Why does Father want me dead? It... it isn't *efficient*. Even Fire Lord Sozin made certain he had an heir on the way before he destroyed the Temples. And Father doesn't." She looked up at her two co-conspirators. "Does he?"

Mai shook her head a fraction of an inch, ink-black hair still in its precise, senbon-hiding style despite their flight. "Court gossip is sure he hasn't even looked at another woman since your mother... left the Palace."

True and cuttingly polite at once. It was almost enough to make Azula relax. Almost. "Ty Lee?"

The airbender was playing with the tip of her braid, pink ruffles just a little wilder than they should be. "We don't know any rumors about an heir. But... since you left the Fire Nation the first time?"

Ty Lee was hesitating. Azula hated seeing her hesitate to do anything. It seemed wrong. Like a flutter-hornet with only one wing. "You've heard something."

"There was a report that Fire Lord Ozai was speaking with someone in the Palace Gardens, a few months ago," Ty Lee obliged. "Then our person disappeared."

Azula arched startled brows. "Disappeared." Disappearing out of the Royal Palace was no small trick. She should know. She'd only had to hide a body from the Catacombs, and that had been messy enough.

Gray eyes were sad and sure. "We don't have a description. It was a new moon night. But the report said Fire Lord Ozai said *matrka*."

Grandmother? Azula thought in disbelief. Ta Min was decades dead. And as for Fire Lady Tejjina, she'd disappeared decades ago-

Disappeared, the day Fire Lord Sozin died.

It can't be. It's impossible.

But it would explain so much. Grandfather Shidan. Grandfather Azulon. Zuko's wordless fits; she'd taunted him for them mercilessly, of course, no one who expected to survive court battles could yield to such a weakness-

And she was thinking about Zuko because she was afraid. Afraid to face the memory, and she would not stand for that. She was Azula, daughter of Ursa and Fire Lord Ozai, and mere fear would never keep her from the truth.

Moonlight. The full moon had shone down as madness pried at her mind; a pitiless cruelty that would see everything bow to its will, would break the world to end its pain, and burn all else to ashes...

Full moon. And new moon. The two nights the sun and moon pulled together. If you believed pap like *Love Amongst the Dragons*, you never knew who or *what* you might meet on those nights.

Mother believed.

Mother had also believed she was a monster.

Well. She was right, wasn't she?

"If Father was speaking to Fire Lady Tejjina," Azula got out, the words like broken glass in her throat, "then you already know what she looks like, Ty Lee." She smirked, when all she wanted to do was bleed. "She called herself Nawahime."

Mai's eyes narrowed.

"The *dragon*?" Ty Lee blurted out. "But I - but you - she-" The airbender swallowed. "You're... not human?"

"None of Sozin's line is human." Azula bared her teeth in a smile. "Just ask the Earth Kingdom."

"I know that's what they always say, but..." Ty Lee shivered. "Those are just stories. No one believes in them anymore!"

"No one at court does. Fire Lord Sozin went to great lengths to make sure of it," Azula mused. "It's just a story. Like spirit vengeance. Fire Sages talking to volcanoes. The Avatar. Stories are always long ago and far away. Not here; not now. No one *lives* in a spirit tale. Well," she waved it off, "except for Uncle. But General Iroh's been... odd, ever since Ba Sing Se. Everyone blamed it on losing Lu Ten. Who wouldn't be odd after that? Uncle's only child. The shining hope of the Fire Nation. The obvious successor to his father, after Azulon. Brilliant. Perfect. Everything Zuko and I would never be." The old, bitter rage flushed chill through her veins. "Just as Fire Lord Azulon planned."

Mai nodded once, thoughtful.

"I don't understand." Ty Lee looked between them, fingers braiding the wind so it slowed and warmed around them. "Zuko loved Lu Ten."

"Zuko didn't linger in secret passageways when the courtiers started getting into their cups," Azula shrugged. It still stung, knowing what she'd known. Zuko was *her* brother. Yes, she'd tried to kill him, and cripple him, and any manner of other tactics. But he was hers. Lu Ten didn't get to break him. Ever. "Fire Lord Azulon planned for what we'd be before we were ever born. Why do you think Father's marriage wasn't arranged until after Lu Ten was well advanced in firebending? None of Ozai's children could surpass the heir." She met gray eyes - but only for a moment. She wanted Ty Lee impressed with her sincerity, not terrified. "But I would have surpassed him. What do you think *Fire Lord* Iroh would have done then?"

Ty Lee sucked in a breath, hurt. "You don't think your uncle would have..."

"Directly? Possibly not," Azula allowed. "But Uncle believes in spirit-tales. And he listens, and waits, rather than act when people drop sly hints of what they plan to do. All it would take is one *suggestion* by the War Minister's faction that the lesser branch of the family should spend time pleasing the spirits by learning with the Fire Sages, and then a few months of laying the groundwork to *discover* a few old legends that would excuse their actions, afterward, for the good of the nation. After all, everyone's seen *Love Amongst the Dragons*. They'd be so publicly horrified, after I was dead, to declare I was a dark dragon, like Tsukikkage. *Just* like him."

"The liar. The betrayer. The destroyer of clans." Mai's gaze never flinched. "Someone who can gather loyalty to him, even from the most innocent, stealing it from weaker great names. A Fire Lord couldn't allow someone like that to live." She shook her head, just once. "But you're not like that anymore. Lord Shidan... he said it would have been his duty to kill you, if you were. To make it quick, and painless." Mai took a quiet breath. "But even if General Iroh had become Fire Lord - a plan like that never would have worked. Zuko would have stopped it."

Azula's eyes glittered. "My brother-"

"It wouldn't matter how sly they were. Your brother can mess up anyone's plans." Mai's smile was just a crinkle of gold eyes. "Lord Shidan calls it a gift."

Now, that was an interesting thought. One which might move their current situation from incredibly dangerous to potentially survivable. If she planned carefully.

Our situation. Azula looked down at the map again, testing that thought. Mother had called her a monster, and no one should *ever* trust a monster. But these people believed in her. Trusted her.

And outside of Mai, who had her own reasons for being here... what had she ever done to betray that trust?

Who better to ask? "Ty Lee. Am I... am I a monster?"

The airbender nibbled her lip. "You've done some horrible things," she said at last. "Zuko... he fought you because he was afraid of you. Of what you'd do to the Fire Nation, if you were the heir. I tried to tell him not to fight, but I don't think he understood. You'd do horrible things to *people*. But I know you wouldn't hurt the Fire Nation. And there are some really bad people out there. People who would do even more horrible things, to everybody, if they thought no one was going to stop them." Ty Lee gave her a brave smile. "But it'd be wonderful if you could stop more people without ever hurting them. Like you did to Avatar Aang. Anshin told me what you said. You broke his footing on the Way, and you didn't even touch him! He must have felt like an Elder sucked all the air out of him... um?"

"His footing on the Way?" Azula asked, startled.

"His... understanding of what the truth is." Ty Lee blushed a little. "You made him see he hadn't been honest with himself. It's like yanking the ground right out from under an earthbender. He must have felt awful." She nodded, satisfied. "He'll learn a lot from that, if he pays attention. And that will save a lot of people."

Azula blinked. Glanced at Mai, whose face seemed even blanker than usual. "...What."

"Your enemies are precious to you," Ty Lee stated, as if quoting an old master. "They teach you what your friends cannot." She bounced in place. "You did a wonderful thing! It wasn't nice, but - he needed someone to teach him. And you honored him with the lesson." Another oddly shy smile. "You're not a monster. You're just really scary."

Mai folded her hands in her sleeves, near far too many knives. Raised a black brow.

You've been challenged, Azula read that look. *Do you want to fight? Or do you want to prove her right?*

Was this what Zuko had felt like, three years ago? Heart beating fast, hands clammy; certain of nothing, except that her people needed her. Even if they didn't know it. Even if her own father didn't know it.

What Father's planning...

She owed Zuko. Her brother. Who'd fought for their people, even when the whole world stood against him. Who believed in her.

My brother, who can shatter anyone's plans. Even the Avatar's. Azula reached out, and tapped the North Pole. *Now, how can I turn that to both our advantage?*

Thumping his feet against one of Toph's bent stone benches, Sokka leaned over the maps Zuko had spread out on the table. Peered at one particular island marked with all kinds of terse little red warnings, trying not to care what Katara might or might not be doing to their dinner while Toph threw rocks at Aang. And cackled about it. Zuko had been banned from making tea after Katara had choked on it, Katara had been banned from gathering things to make tea after Aang caught her picking some pretty, white, and sweet-smelling flowers from one of the Temple gardens, and Sokka had managed to trip over that batch of tea before Toph could sample it. Though it had been tricky not getting caught scrubbing out the teapot. Ack.

Put that together with the *glorious fun* of keeping everybody from each others' throats in one small sky bison's saddle all the way across the ocean from Dragons' Wings, even with Zuko and Toph playing tricks with lodestone-bending to keep busy, and it was shaping up to be his *best week ever*.

Oh. And based on that nifty little translucent wave-and-grin he'd seen from a balcony when they landed, somewhere in this temple was a sort-of-friendly swordsman's ghost. Hanging out to look after the Air Nuns' place. Probably snickering at all of them. Sokka was sure of it.

"She really wasn't trying to poison you," Sokka sighed, glancing at the gold eyes across the table. "I don't think Katara even knew what *suzuran* was. Who'd think Air Nuns would keep poison plants in the kitchen garden?"

"Who teaches their kids to ride elephant koi?" Zuko gave him a skeptical look. "Sokka. That was everyone's teapot. If your sister tries to poison me, she'll do a much better job." He paused. "She probably won't. Rip my throat out with ice, maybe. She's an honest fighter. She'd do it face to face."

Sokka buried his face in his hand. "You know, it really creeps me out that you think my sister wants to kill you."

"She does want to kill me."

"Aaaand there you go again, acting all calm about it," Sokka groaned. Lifted his head. "Couldn't you, you know, put a little oomph into it? Scream, yell, react like any regular... human being... never mind..."

"Sokka. People have been trying to kill me since before I was born." Zuko smirked. "If I overreacted every time someone just wanted to kill me, I'd never have time to sleep." He glanced away, shifting uncomfortably. "I know how hard it is to pick something safe from plants you've never seen before. Back in the Earth Kingdom, Uncle almost killed himself with a cup of tea." That lone brow arched at him. "How did you know about *suzuran*?"

Oh. Um. Darn it. "I don't want to talk about it."

"There's a lot of things none of us want to talk about," Zuko said flatly. "Should you talk about it?"

Ouch. Fair question. "Aang has a lot of enemies," Sokka started. "Not all of them are alive."

Frowning, Zuko nodded.

Sokka swallowed. "We ended up in Shu Jing for a few days."

"You ended up-" The unscarred eye widened. "You ran into Temul? And Aang's still *alive*?"

Sokka gave him a second look. "You know about Temul?"

"She's hard to forget." Zuko was studying him very, very carefully. "If she met Aang, and he's still breathing..." The firebender winced. "What did she do to you?"

Sokka shrugged. "She needed something to let Aang go. I can live with it."

"You just don't want to talk about it."

"No, I don't want to talk about it," Sokka shot back. *"Grandmother scared us all with ghost stories, but dragon-child ghosts can turn your hair white-"*

Oh. Hell.

"That-" Sokka cleared his throat, and glared at one too damn observant great name. "That was not fair."

"I had to know what I was dealing with." Zuko looked away. "Sorry. I know about spirits dragging you into something you never wanted."

Which didn't click. There was no way Zuko could have gotten pulled into any mess that could screw up his life as bad as Temul's *hi, mine*, did for a Water Tribesman-

He said the Moon Spirit drowned him to do him a favor.

And right after she'd rescued Appa, Toph had said Lee was a Fire Nation *waterbender*.

It'd kind of gotten lost in the shuffle for him, Sokka reflected, stunned. He *knew* it had slipped Katara's mind, because she knew Lee was Zuko, and Zuko was a firebender, and nobody but the Avatar could bend two elements.

Only it turned out yāorén could. Witness Langxue, a Kyoshi Island waterbender who - according to Saoluan - had gotten thumped with air due to darn near getting killed by a spirit-monster.

Zuko flash-fried Fong's army. With fire ice. Yeah, one waterbender could have shoved all that ice around, I know Katara could have - but she would have been pretty tapped out afterward. Langxue was up, cranky, and ready to fight. So he didn't do it alone. And Amaya wasn't there, she was back with the other healers, rested up so she could handle casualties...

Sokka let out a slow breath. "If I threw a cup of water at you, what would happen?"

Zuko gave him a hard look.

"Right. Don't answer that. Not going to do it. Oh, man." Sokka rubbed at an impending headache. "Spirits. Do *not* tell Katara."

"I wasn't planning to," Zuko said dryly.

"No, I mean you *really* can't. A few weeks back, we ran into somebody..." Sokka glanced around the room to make sure no one was in listening distance. Before he'd thought Zuko was paranoid for

insisting on looking over the maps where no one could sneak up on them. They were in an Air Temple. Who else could get up here?

Except the way Zuko had walked around open holes in the floor with barely a second glance to check where they were, determined Fire Nation guys could get up here. Great.

Kind of wish the Fire Nation was all we had to worry about. "We ran into a waterbender before the eclipse," Sokka sighed. "A Southern Tribe waterbender."

Zuko drew back, frowning. "But the Southern waterbenders were all-"

"Taken by the Fire Nation," Sokka cut him off. "Exactly. Only Hama... found a way to break out. It was gruesome. What she ended up doing to people in the years since then - put it this way. When Aang first heard the stories, he thought there was an angry spirit loose. So did your grandfather." Sokka scratched under his wolf-tail, trying to find any less ugly way to phrase it. "Katara fought her. Your grandfather... Shidan made sure she wasn't taken alive. It was bad-"

Wait. Wait just a minute. He'd said Hama, and Zuko's eyes had narrowed- "What do you know about Hama?" Sokka challenged him.

Zuko held up a hand, and shook his head. "If it's the same Hama, Kuzon met her a long time ago. He left... records." He paused, obviously picking his words. "If it helps, you can tell Katara her escape tied up chunks of the Home Guard for months."

"Don't think it would," Sokka admitted. "I think we'd all be better off forgetting it ever happened. What Katara had to do to fight her... it messed her up. I don't think she's figured out how much. She acts like she's okay. She's not. We didn't have time for her to talk to Dad, and she puts on a smile for Aang, so he doesn't know how bad she's hurting. Toph wants to help, but it's not something she can throw a rock at. And I'm just the big brother who can't bend. Not a big deal most of the time. But what Hama did? It made Katara *hate* her bending. The part of her that's always been the most important thing in the world. If she found out about you..."

"She might hate herself the way she hates me," Zuko said steadily. "I don't want that either." He took a deep breath. "And you might have noticed, I don't exactly spread the word around. I know what the spirits want from me. I know what *Aang* would want from me. And damn it, *no*. This whole mess got this bad because the Face-Stealer started throwing a tantrum. The only way to handle a spoiled brat is to say *no*. And make it stick." He looked back at the map, and smiled wryly. "But since you figured it out... now I can tell you why we can pull this off."

"This," Sokka said skeptically. "You mean, find one Fire Sage who might be anywhere in the Fire Nation. If he's still alive."

"He *might* be anywhere," Zuko agreed, still weirdly cheerful. "But I doubt it. He's a political prisoner, he's important, and he has to be invisible. There's not that many prisons that fit the bill." He stabbed a finger down on the map. "Boiling Rock. The highest-security prison in the Fire Nation. Odds are, Fire Sage Shiyu is here."

Sokka eyed the chart, looking at the ragged, near-circular island. "You put a prison for firebenders in the middle of a volcano? That's like putting earthbenders in a rock quarry!"

"Oh, not just any volcano." Zuko was almost *grinning*. "The prison's on an island itself. In the volcano caldera. Surrounded by a *boiling lake*."

Sokka looked at the map. Looked back at Zuko.

The yāorén's smirk grew a little wider.

Sokka pulled out a smirk of his own. Looked at the map again, and started to laugh. "Boiling water... oh man, I can't wait to see the looks on their *faces*..."

It felt good to laugh, Zuko thought. Especially with someone who didn't believe in Destiny, or Great Plans, or that everything horrible in your life would somehow come out right in the end if you only *believed*.

Uncle? I love you. But putting your faith in the spirits is like putting it in the sea. Sure, it's bigger than we are. It's more powerful. That doesn't mean it cares.

Sokka knew that in his bones, the way Kuzon had known Mount Shirotona. The way Zuko hoped he'd know Asagitsutsu, if he lived that long. You had to respect the world around you. You had to pay attention. But trust it?

He felt distant waves tremble through stone, and scowled. *Turn your back on the sea, and it'll kill you.*

Every good sailor knew that. Every marine. Why couldn't Uncle figure it out?

Well. He is Army.

And Lu Ten's death had hurt him, in a way a younger prince hadn't been able to understand. Even now, Zuko was pretty sure he hadn't grasped the depth of it. Kuzon had lost his friends, his wife, his hope. But he'd never lost his daughter.

Uncle has to believe that everything will come out right. That there was a purpose to everything. Even Lu Ten's death. If there wasn't - what does he have to live for?

Hopefully Amaya, now. And more than just her, soon... which he was *not* going to think about. The whole idea still terrified him. Not to mention, if Katara found out that Amaya was...

Bad idea. Don't go there.

Much, much safer to worry about that last argument he'd had with Uncle before they'd left. Which pretty much boiled down to, *stop asking the spirits for help, damn it*.

Agni, that had been ugly.

Respect for spirits was fine. Offerings, also fine. But asking spirits for their help was running up a debt with the spirit world, and Dragons' Wings was on shaky enough ground just staying alive. Asagitsutsu had challenged them to channel her eruption into a safer, saner course. Taking anything away from that effort was like setting fire to your own rope bridge.

Still. That hadn't been enough to convince Iroh. Zuko had had to make it personal.

I'm a yāorén, Uncle. When the spirits want things balanced out, they're going to come looking for me. Whether or not I had anything to do with it.

I'm a yāorén, and I'm your nephew. When you run up debts, I end up paying them. Only sometimes the spirits can't find me. You know who they'll look for then? Anyone around me. Master Amaya. Captain Jee and his crew. Agent Shirong, and all the Wen clan. Including Jinhai.

You want to put your faith in the spirit world, so Avatar Aang restores the balance? Fine. But don't

you dare drag a little kid into your private war!

Yeah. It'd been *really* ugly. Because Uncle had latched onto the whole yāorén bit, and tried to turn the subject to how pleased he was that his nephew was following the spirits' will to aid the Avatar-

Which had devolved into knife-edged words over why stopping Koh was not the same thing as helping the Avatar, and exactly how Aang had left Toph hamstrung by her own promises to him, and... Zuko didn't want to think about the rest of it.

Uncle Iroh had walked off, outwardly unruffled, to enjoy a calming cup of tea. Zuko had stormed out to the practice grounds and shattered enough ice to freeze the bay solid.

Compared to that, arguing Jee and the marines into letting him go without a bodyguard had been *easy*.

Katara's convinced Toph might take my side; and when she feels outnumbered, she goes on the attack. Sokka's got a pretty good idea how much damage I can do on my own. And Aang's allergic to uniforms. Anybody not from the Fire Nation would get caught in minutes if something goes wrong; anyone who was, would be opposing the Fire Lord, and that's just asking the spirits to kill us.

No. The only person with a chance of pulling this off - who could get Aang to the teacher he needed, without pivoting the Avatar right into another Koh-spawned disaster - was an exile.

Granted, as an exile, he was subject to execution on sight. But Zuko was fairly sure he was safer taking his chances with human beings, rather than the spirits that swarmed to Aang like mosquito-moths to a flame.

Spirits. Argh. What did he do about Uncle?

Problem is, he's doing the same thing he's always done, Zuko reflected, looking back at very old memories. *Undermining people to "help" them. He did it to Ozai when he was Azulon's heir. He kept doing it when my father became the Fire Lord. And he did it to me for three years on the Wani.*

Granted, a thirteen-year-old who'd never been out of the Fire Nation before shouldn't have been in command of a ship to start with. But by the time he'd dealt with his first mutiny, Zuko had already figured out that the rumors and trouble that sent the *Wani* chasing across the known world somehow *always* worked to Iroh's advantage.

He'd followed them anyway. What choice did he have? The Avatar had to be out there. Somewhere.

And he was. But I'm not thirteen anymore, and we've got bigger problems than finding Aang. So what do I do about Uncle?

He wasn't sure yet. Hopefully hunting down Shiyu would give him some time to think. Though that wasn't the only thing he had to think about.

I want to tell Sokka. Agni, I want to.

Some waterbenders had died in Azulon's prison. But some *hadn't*.

Zuko stepped away from Sokka and the maps, heading over toward the cliff-shadowed balcony for a breath of sea air. The salt was thinner up here, much of it blown out against the rocks before it

got this high. But he could still taste it, and see blue water far below, and feel the water move with the rush of waves-

Took two steps back, as a heavy wave rolled in like thunder.

...At least Sokka couldn't see his face, Zuko thought, trying to tamp down a rush of embarrassment. They were way too high up here to even be touched by the spray.

Unless, of course, a waterbender got involved. Which was part of why Aang and his friends had settled in this part of the Temple, nearer the harbor, for now. There was less damage to the structures here, where salt air pruned back clinging vines. It wasn't too far to go to yank a net through the bay or gather shellfish. Most important of all, to the uneasy peace he was trying to keep with these people... here, Katara had the whole ocean on her side.

The easiest way to make it so she doesn't squash me, is to make it so she always thinks that she can, Zuko thought darkly.

It was a bitter pill to swallow. Looking this weak around Azula would have gotten him *killed*.

It's not forever. Just long enough to keep the situation under control. We find Shiyu, I am out of here.

Still. As long as he was acting harmless for Katara and Aang, he didn't want to be near the ocean. No sense in tempting fate.

And telling Sokka about Lituya Bay would *definitely* be tempting fate.

They're Sokka's people. He should know.

But everyone who'd survived their supposed shipwreck knew what Hama had done. To this day, some of them still felt shamed. Both by what she'd done, somehow forcing a guard to snap his own neck-

And even more, by the fact she'd left them behind.

Hama went mad, and they couldn't stop her, Zuko thought bleakly. *She was one of their tribe. She was their responsibility.*

That they'd been Fire Nation prisoners had only poisoned the wound more. Some had faded and died of it, like ice caught in summer sun. Some had drifted away, taking ships to the Earth Kingdom to lose themselves in the faceless hordes of refugees.

But some had survived. Zuko knew it, because Kuzon had known exactly where they were. And if Ozai had ever uncovered just how Karasu of Byakko's "fishing village" really produced such fine sea salt, the uproar would have blown the Caldera off the map.

I want to tell him. We're so close. But if we're captured - they'll ask him where to find other waterbenders.

And trapped with the onmitsu, anyone would talk.

Even if death by torture hadn't been an option, Sokka had said Katara's fight with Hama had hurt her. If the Southern waterbenders thought she'd been tainted by Hama's teachings...

Amak wouldn't.

But Amak and Karasu were a whole other kettle of viper-eels. Telling Katara about them would be *bad*.

Damn it. Sokka deserves to know something. "If Aang pulls this off, and you live through the war," Zuko said carefully, "get a message to Byakko. Tell them who you are, your parents' and grandparents' names. Ask to send a message to Lady Karasu. She's my aunt," he elaborated. "My mother's youngest sister. Kind of a daredevil. She deals in sea stores; salt, fish, seaweed - if it comes out of the ocean, she brings it to market."

Sokka gave him a considering look. "This is important."

"Yes."

"And you're not going to tell me any more."

Zuko shook his head.

Sokka squinted at him, frowning. "Is this something I shouldn't tell Katara?"

Zuko looked out and down at the water again, as a ninth-wave gathered up smaller wavelets and smashed spray against the rocks. *Note, don't get caught down there when the tide comes in.* "If you get that far, you can probably tell her everything-"

"What?" Sokka set a rock paperweight on the maps, stepping beside him to scan the waves. "Is something down there?"

Zuko gave him a sidelong glance.

"I've fought spirits. We all have." Sokka shrugged, trying to look like he did it every day. And failing miserably. "Any of us start getting too far from Aang, things... show up. Sometimes." He tapped his fingers on the balcony stone. "And I haven't heard Boots in a day or two. That's usually not good. Add in that I know some kind of swordsman-ghost is up here-" He cut himself off. "Damn. I've seen him before. Where?"

Zuko sucked in a breath, hit by memories of pain and loss. "You saw Shih?"

"That's it! That's where I- wait a minute." Blue eyes cut to him. "You know him?"

Lump in his throat, Zuko nodded. "He saved my life. When I was..." He had to look away. "This was the first Air Temple I came to after I was exiled. I was angry. And," he gestured toward his scar, tried to make it a shrug. "I couldn't see very well. I got lost."

"Not hard to do," Sokka reflected. "They really didn't build this place for people who can't fly. It's kind of scary. Stairs that lead up to nowhere, holes in the floor-"

Zuko flinched.

"Ooo, that doesn't look good," Sokka sighed. "What happened?"

"I got lost," Zuko repeated. No need to get into the details of how dizzy and sick he'd been. Not to mention young and stubborn and *stupid*, pressing on in the middle of the night when he *knew* he was lost. "I tried to get back to where I thought the ship had to be. Only I ran into a strange little swordsman with a fire built right in the middle of the hallway." He had to pause, shaking his head at his own arrogance. "I ordered him to tell me what an onmitsu was doing there. He said his name was Shih, and if I could move the fire, he'd give me all the answers I needed. So, I tried." He

snorted. *Now*, it was funny. Back then? Not so much. "Something hit me too fast to see, and I was sure I was dead. You don't turn your back on an onmitsu. Not and live." He paused. "Next thing I knew, it was morning. And where that fire had been, in the shadows I couldn't see..."

Sokka swallowed. "Hole in the floor?"

"Went down at least a hundred feet." Zuko still shuddered at the memory. "How did you know?"

"Dad has a story like that, about an ice crevasse and his grandpa," Sokka admitted. He gave Zuko a wry grin. "And Temul showed us a little of what Shih was like when he was alive. I guess he's still one of the good guys..." The Water Tribesman trailed off, looking thoughtful.

Zuko took a wary step back. "What?"

"He was an onmitsu who never wanted to fight again. Who came up here so he'd never have to. Only Temul got here right before Sozin's guys, and he and Gyate ended up kidnapping the kids so they'd live," Sokka said, half to himself. "Temul got them away, but... they were gone when Sozin came for her. I wish - I was hoping they got away all right. But if he's a ghost, here..."

"They did get away," Zuko said quietly. "Don't ask me how I know," he warned, as Sokka shot him a startled look. "I won't tell you. But Shih and Gyate - Shidan knew them. They had long, happy lives. Not every ghost stays on earth because of violence. Sometimes there's just something they need to do."

"I wonder if he'd tell us what," Sokka muttered. Caught Zuko's confused look, and turned a little red. "He looked so happy with Gyate. If he's stuck here, and she's not - that just doesn't seem right."

Ran. Zuko still remembered that pain; knowing she was gone, and he had to keep breathing. Death had softened it, but it still hurt. "You want to help him."

"You're a Fire Nation prince, right? He was a Fire Nation onmitsu. And Aang's an airbender." Sokka rubbed his hands together, like gathering scraps of string into a ball to bat at a pygmy puma. "If all of us can work together to put a ghost to rest - maybe Katara and Aang can figure out you are one of the good guys."

"Except I'm not," Zuko argued. "I'm just trying to save my people."

"And if we don't save the world, your people end up fried," Sokka said wryly. "Hey. You're helping. That's more than a lot of people we've met." He clapped a hand on Zuko's shoulder. "So, how do we track down a ghost?"

It wasn't right, for Sokka to be laughing with him like that.

Shaking out laundry, Katara watched them from another balcony, careful to keep out of sight. Toph and Aang both trusted too much, for different reasons. Toph believed Zuko would only burn down things that deliberately got in his way, and Aang had been walking around in a daze ever since that night with the drowned, trying to work out what it meant to save the world as Aang, instead of the Avatar.

Which was kind of silly. The world was what it was. Aang *was* the Avatar. He couldn't be anything else, any more than she could be the chief of her tribe.

Sokka... she trusted her brother to deal with Zuko. Mostly. Zuko might have been a prince, but Sokka still was a chief's son. He knew who he was, and what he was. Nothing Zuko could say

would change that.

Though I don't think he's trying to change anything, Katara admitted to herself, watching them pick up the maps, evidently discussing yet another of the Fire Nation's uncounted sets of small islands. *I think Zuko's trying to help. Maybe.*

The annoying thing was, it was actually a good idea. Shiyu was a master firebender, and he'd helped them all when there hadn't been a prayer of fighting the whole Fire Nation. Just two scared Water Tribe kids, a lost airbender, Momo, and Appa.

Zuko always had a motive. His honor. His kingdom. His mixed-up little bunch of refugees and exiles on a volcano. There was always something else behind whatever Zuko was doing. Shiyu had just wanted to help.

At least we know what Zuko's motive is, Katara reflected, hanging up one of her chest wraps to catch the sun better. *Get Aang away from his volcano, and stick a finger in the Face-Stealer's eye.*

It wasn't a *nice* motive. But she could live with it, as long as they got what Aang needed. And... it wasn't a bad thing for Sokka to have another boy to talk to. She knew her own temper as much as she knew her brother's. And, well - Toph was twelve, and when Aang wasn't acting old and wise as her Gran-Gran, sometimes he acted like he was *five*. Sokka had to get frustrated dealing with all of them. If he wanted to take a sword and hack at somebody just to wear the crazy out of himself, and Zuko was willing to let him - better the firebender than anybody else.

And we need help. I just wish it was Master Piandao, instead. Or even Shidan. He wasn't human, but - we knew he wasn't human.

Zuko was like the Earth King's bear. He wasn't any one thing. He wasn't human, but he wasn't *not* human, either. Who knew what he'd do?

Toph thinks she does. Sokka thinks he does.

And she trusted them. She did. But Aang wanted to believe in Zuko; wanted to think that the firebender who'd chased them halfway across the world could be a friend. And when Aang was hopeful, he... well, sometimes he didn't look at everything that might happen. So somebody had to keep a suspicious eye on Zuko. For all their sakes.

Though so far he hadn't done anything. Yet.

Maybe he means it. Maybe he's trying to help.

And if he didn't... here they were, right over the dark pulse of the ocean.

Right where you can strangle the life from him with a flick of your fingers, when you choose...

Katara shook her head, and looked out at the waves.

Sun glinted on surging water, bright and innocent.

Chapter End Notes

Suzuran - lily-of-the-valley. Very pretty. Very, very toxic. People have been killed by

ingesting the water from a vase the cut flowers were standing in. (No, I don't know why they did that either.) Yes, Jee's ship was named that on purpose.

Knowing how to use plants available near the Arctic does not tell you what plants are safe in the temperate or tropical zones. Seriously, it's no wonder Sokka and Katara had trouble hunting and gathering.

Yes, I slammed the movie. "Earthbenders! You are surrounded by earth!" Shyalaman? That was *embarrassing*.

Chapter 77

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Come on, guys, let's find a ghost," Sokka muttered to himself. Lifted his lantern to scan the corners of yet another echoing, empty stone room. Moonlight would be fine to search any normal building, but an Air Temple? Full moon or not, he wasn't going to chance that a shadow was only a shadow, and not a hole plunging a neck-breaking distance to the waves below. "Why doesn't someone hit me when I come up with these things?"

Well, Aang had thought it was a *great* idea. Katara was up for anything that made Aang happy. And Zuko seemed darkly convinced that finding a ghost wouldn't get him in any more trouble than *not* finding a ghost.

About which, Sokka had to admit, he had a point. Zuko was an exile, and technically a traitor, and even if this wasn't officially part of the Fire Nation, it was close enough that it wouldn't matter. Anyone who caught him had the right to execute him on the spot. Finding a ghost who'd saved his life so he could say thanks, could only increase Zuko's odds.

Meaning the only sane person in the whole Temple was Toph, who'd stayed back with Appa to tap her feet on the floor and wait. If Shih wanted to find her, he would. If Shih didn't want anyone to find him... well, hopefully they'd know that by morning. With luck, not in a painful way.

Now, if Sokka could just get his heart to slow down and *believe* that.

"We can split up and cover more ground," Sokka grumbled, retreating back to the corridor to check the next twisty room. Salt and mold twitched his nose, as his boots stirred old dust on the floor. "Yeah. Just like we did with Hama. *Great* idea-"

Something was wrong with the shadows.

Lantern in his left hand, Sokka reached for his sword.

Huh. Found the dawn prayer hall.

Zuko had tried to take a section of the temple he'd explored before, three years and a lot of pain ago. He hadn't expected to recognize it. A long, columned hall, half carved out of the cliff wall, with odd ferns as gray-green splotches in the moonlight. The other half was open to sea air, with a few thin domes of verdigris still hanging in a few of the arches.

Wind chimes, Zuko realized, struck by memories a lifetime away. He could see in his mind's eye how the hall would have looked a century ago. Bright, polished-copper domes of wind chimes in every other pillared arch; a rainbow of ribbons dangling down, carved wooden prayers clinking together in the breeze's own music. Red to let angry thoughts flow away in the wind. Green to draw in health for the gardens and mothers. Yellow and orange for the wind-spirits, blue and white to bind new life and sever ties when it was time.

Fragile, perishable prayers. The nuns thought even the most heartfelt wish needed to be renewed and strengthened, the mind rededicated to the Temple's stern principles year after year, decade after decade, life after life.

And there were more practical reasons, as well. Here, the nuns could bring their nursing young to greet the first rays of dawn, stretching tiny fists to the sunlight. If baby fingers and bending yanked on wood and ribbons - it never hurt to make a prayer twice.

Aang's children won't know this.

Oh, Aang might know about the wind chimes. Especially if he asked the yamabushi. But the hues the nuns had used for each tamed desire, the traditions passed from mother to adoptive daughter and granddaughter; how generations of women had walked this hall with storm-restless little airbenders...

Everyone who remembers that life is dead. Zuko swallowed, lantern-light flickering. Even me.

The Temples had been stifling. The Temples had been *wrong*, locking the minds and hearts of Air into forms more and more alien to the rest of the world. Any one of a dozen chiefs or kings might have raised their hands against the Nomads, if they'd dared... if Sozin hadn't beaten them to it.

But even the most mindbent Air Nomad Elder was still human. And so many of those here hadn't been Elders. They'd been mothers. Sisters. Children.

We did what we could. Saved what we could. Sometimes, everything burns.

And he refused to feel guilty because one teenage firebender and an ancient, cranky dragon-child hadn't been enough to save the world. Kuzon, Temul, everyone who'd risked their lives to help - even with every hand against them, they'd *tried*.

Zuko had to laugh, low and wry, remembering Temul's chill presence as blood mixed with the rain. "And damned if we didn't go out in style."

I died with a friend, and an honorable man to remember me. Not a bad way to go.

Not like what Sozin had unleashed here. Not at all.

...And damn it, that was *definitely* not his fault. He hadn't taught innocent women and children to make themselves easy to kill.

"Aang thinks life is precious," Zuko muttered. "Someone's got to get through to him, death is precious too..."

A whisper of wind; or maybe cloth against leather. He didn't glance that way, listening, *smelling*...

A slosh of water in leather, and he looked into cold blue eyes.

Oh. Wonderful.

Sword drawn, Sokka moved it slowly toward the rippling light.

"Trust your instincts," Temul had said one night, in the middle of kicking his butt yet again. "Those hairs are on the back of your neck for a reason. If something feels *off* - you travel with the Avatar, young man. Assume there's a spirit until you have good reason to believe otherwise. You avoid more horrible, lingering deaths that way.

"Your tribe says waterbenders are closer to the spirits? That's true. Spirits are energy. Chi is energy. And nothing in life comes free. Anyone who moves energy - benders, swordsmen, onmitsu, dragons - is vulnerable to energy.

"Energy against energy, spirits win.

"So what do you do to fight a spirit, young man? You come from a tribe of survivors; you know this! How does a poor, weak *human* - a mere scrap of energy, wrapped in blood and bone - fight a tsunami? Think!"

You use tools, Sokka thought now, positioning dark, polished space-metal so it reflected the waves below. *Like the chief's special fishing hook Dad catches fish for the Ocean with, so the rest of the catch is ours. Like Gran-Gran's basket-weaves, that make illness-spirits follow the maze, so they don't make it past to people.*

Spirits were energy. They beat people with energy, stomping human chi into submission the way Toph would powder an annoying fortress wall. But they couldn't do that if they couldn't *touch* it.

That's why Sozin and other Fire Lords kept stomping on belief in the spirits, Sokka realized. *If you don't know they're there, it's harder for them to get at you. Like the Painted Lady. As long as the jerk running the factory didn't believe - she couldn't hit him hard. Not without help.*

He believed in spirits. Flying around the world with Aang, you couldn't *not* believe. Especially after you'd KO'd a knowledge spirit with a book.

So if he looked right at whatever was out there, he opened a hole in his defenses. Just like lowering his blade in a swordfight. If Sokka saw it, it could see him.

But if he looked at its reflection...

White sparkled in the moonlight above the waves, fine as diamond dust.

Sokka's heart thudded, quick and painful. *It's not cold enough for diamond dust.*

It never got cold enough for diamond dust. Not in the Fire Nation. Maybe on top of Mount Shirotona, in a really cold year. This close to warm ocean water? Not possible.

And when you had frozen water where you shouldn't... then you had waterbending.

Katara bent water for combat, not to be pretty. Aang probably didn't even know what diamond dust was. And neither of them had any reason to be down there...

Idiot. I'm missing one.

Except Zuko had no reason to be down there, either. And plenty of good reasons *not* to be down there. Katara was trying to be civil, but Sokka had vivid memories of what had happened the last time she'd had Zuko cornered with his back to the ocean. He kind of doubted Zuko had forgotten it.

Besides. Zuko probably had even less clues about diamond dust than Aang did. Firebenders *hated* cold.

So. If it's not them, then what-

Something sinuous slipped through the waves.

That... can't be as big as it looks.

Except that red-spider-thing that had gone after Toph had been plenty big, and Hei Bai had been even bigger, and... oh, frost it.

"So if there's some reason you're stuck here," Aang summed up, scratching behind Momo's ears, "we thought... well, maybe we could help you out."

"It was kindly meant." Seated on the edge of the balcony in the moonlight, one sandaled foot swinging free, the ghost smiled. "But I am not bound here by violence, young one. I wait as a guardian, until the time is right."

Oh. Well, that was good. Kind of? "So... when will the time be right?" Aang ventured.

Shih's eyes danced. "Traditionally, a family ghost lingers until one's children have grandchildren."

So there were rules about this? That was kind of neat- *Wait* a minute. "You've been here over a hundred *years!*"

"Hmm... no," Shih said thoughtfully. "I have been *here* less than nineteen years, I believe." He grinned. "But there is truth to what you say. One of my offspring is taking a very long time to do his filial duty."

"No kidding!" Aang shook his head, amazed. "Why haven't you pestered him into doing what's right? I mean, I didn't get it before, but - clans are serious to the Fire Nation, right?"

"First, because *pestering* someone into good behavior rarely lasts," Shih stated, leaning back against empty air. "Second, he has at last found a strong lady to stand beside, so I believe that difficulty will solve itself. Eventually. Third, because he has been *very* busy, and one would not wish to place yet another burden on his shoulders. But fourth, and most important of all, the lady I took to wife was born and raised an Air Nomad, and her son likewise. How could I ask him to be bound by teachings he did not know, and heart-ties he does not feel? As well ask young Toph to break a bargain she has made, or the young lord to turn his back on his people." A ghostly finger tapped Aang's nose. "Or those two of the Southern Tribe to turn you away when you are in need, after they have declared you family. It could be done. Humans are capable of impossible courage. But it would break their hearts." Shih settled back onto the balcony. "What would break your heart, young one? Had you wished all your friends to find me, you would have brought them here. You did not. So...?"

Aang swallowed, petting warm fur. The lemur's fingers brushed his shaved head, tickling his ear. "I'm still scared." Which was maybe a silly thing to say to a ghost. "I don't want to do this. I don't want to firebend, or to face Fire Lord Ozai. Or the Face-Stealer. I wish... I wish I could just run away."

Shih sighed. "And here I cannot be kind, much as I might wish it. Aang. The peril you face, the danger to the whole world... much of it is because many people did run away. And have run away, for centuries. Doing the right thing... it costs one. Sometimes only a moment's discomfort. Sometimes a lifetime hunted and afraid, ever looking over one's shoulder for the blades of those you have defied. Sometimes - everything." The onmitsu shook his head. "It is not fair. So many failed to do what was right when it was easier, and now the weight of those failures buries you." He lifted his gaze, determined. "But know this, Aang. You are stronger than you fear. Because you *are* afraid, and yet you act." A steady nod. "That, is courage."

"But if you don't think it's going to work-" Aang shrugged. "That's not courage. That's just stupid."

"Hmm." Dark brows went up. "Was Zhao stupid?"

"Well, yeah!" Aang flung up his hands. "Killing the moon? That would have put the whole *world* out of balance, and it took out waterbending, and... er."

Shih's smile was wry. "One would remind you that both those outcomes would have favored Zhao, would they not?"

"But it was *wrong*," Aang protested.

"It was evil," the ghost acknowledged. "If evil always meant stupidity, your task would not be so difficult, would it? Aang. Always, *always* know that your enemies have their own reasons. If you can find those reasons, you may be able to persuade them that your plan is the wiser, and will - *over time* - allow them to reap the most benefit. And if that is possible, then they may no longer be enemies."

Okay. Except that didn't make sense, didn't people just know a good idea when they heard one... oops.

"Katara tried to tell me that," Aang admitted, face red. "She said I should try to master the elements first, not... not use General Fong's plan, with the Avatar State." He scrunched his shoulders, frustrated. "But I just wanted the war to *stop*."

"It is never wrong to wish people free of hatred and pain," Shih agreed. "But what we wish must be tempered by what we know we can do. And cannot. Was Roku stupid?"

"...Um." Because Avatar or not, he had been going up against a volcano, and apparently even the World Spirit had trouble with volcanoes. But Ta Min and his family had gotten away. So... um. "I don't know?"

"Heh." Shih folded his arms, and gave Aang a knowing look. "Were your two young Southern friends stupid, to go with a young student across an entire world at war, knowing the Avatar would be hunted and hounded by the entire Fire Nation?"

"But Katara believed in me," Aang argued.

"And did her belief make her peril less?" Shih asked, very quiet. "Or more?"

Aang swallowed. Why didn't he know what to say? Katara wasn't stupid.

"Aang!" Sokka skidded out onto the balcony. "Oh good, Toph was right, you're here... we've got trouble!"

"Trouble?" Aang bounced to his feet, glad to get away from prickly questions. "What kind of-"

On the other side of the Temple, fire roared.

Ozai's son, lit by flames. How appropriate.

"Katara." Zuko loosened his grip on the handle of his lantern. Probably so she wouldn't see that he'd been ready to toss it at her, oil and all, spinning out ribbons of flames to wrap her in pain. She knew the thought had crossed his mind. More than once.

After all, if you want to hurt him... and Water never hurts its own... how much more must he want to hurt you?

But he looked away. As if she weren't even worth noticing.

He'll regret that.

"Did Sokka have a better idea where to look for Shih?" Zuko had the lantern up again, looking toward where long-ago builders had gnawed into the cliff. "Or did you get turned around? This place is a maze if you don't have a good map. I wonder if they thought that was part of the fun-"

"You think they built a sacred place for fun?" Katara cut him off. Even in the windless heat of a summer night, she could feel the Temple's power. What it would be like in autumn storms, with winds ready to airbender hands... it must have been incredible.

And he destroyed it.

...Well, not Zuko directly. But close enough.

"They had ball courts, air-cake cook-offs, and calligraphy competitions," Zuko shrugged. "So, yes. You know Aang. He thinks the world exists to have fun in."

"So?" Katara stalked forward, hearing the soft clink of a verdigris dome hanging from a ragged chain. All this ruin, because of firebenders' arrogance... "Why shouldn't it?"

Zuko eyed her, and faded back down the hall to what he probably thought was a safer distance. "That sounds really weird, coming from you."

"You think I don't know how to have fun?" Toph thought so. Sokka thought so. Even Aang thought so. It made her feel cold inside. Ready to prove them all wrong.

Yes... let's have some lovely fun...

"I think we're looking for a ghost, in a deserted temple, so Aang can feel better about Sokka's plan to go find a firebending teacher." Zuko was frowning. "*Fun* isn't exactly what comes to mind."

What, the Fire Nation didn't tell ghost stories for fun? Oh, that was right, they wouldn't. Their ghosts were too malevolent for that.

Such as the one who lairs here, keeping those powers who would help you at bay... you give so much to all of them. Don't you deserve help? And they hold it from you...

"Destroyed, not deserted," Katara snapped, advancing again. Honestly, no wonder Toph and Aang were confused. Fire didn't care about sacredness, or respect. Zuko only cared about something if he could use it. No wonder the younger children didn't know how to face him. "You know they didn't just *leave*."

Protect the children...

"Deserted." Zuko's voice was so calm, it grated. "As in, nobody lives here right now. Not like the Northern Temple, or that really weird guy at the Eastern Temple. Who in their right mind drinks banana-onion..." He stopped, scar sucking up the light like a hungry shadow. "Katara? Are you feeling okay? It's been a long night."

She eyed him right back, unable to believe his attitude. "People died here. Horribly. And you don't even care."

"What the heck are you..." Zuko lowered the lantern, face hard-edged by shadows. "I didn't do this."

"No." Keep moving. Keep pushing. Water never failed. It might freeze, it might puff away as mist, but it was never destroyed. Not like fire. "You just didn't stop it."

Water against Fire, Water wins. As it should. Water is home, is family; and family's never evil, it can't be...

"That was a hundred years ago," Zuko snapped, stepping a little sideways. Away from the arches. Away from the water. "How old do you think I am?"

He's afraid of me. Why would he be afraid, if he hasn't done anything wrong?

Unless he just hasn't done it yet.

I knew it. I knew we couldn't trust him. You can never trust fire, it sears and scorches and cooks-

Cooks away the lovely salt blood, oh, let's show him what fun really is...

No. She'd make him confess, first. Aang would want that. "Old enough to know your great-grandfather was a murderer." *Now. Now he'll attack me. Now - and I'll just be defending myself-*

Zuko... blinked at her. "Which one? I've got four. They all killed people. Be a little more specific."

She'd expected evil. She'd expected rage. But this? Jaw dropping, she took a half-step back, hand near the safety of her waterskin. "You're not even ashamed of it."

Zuko kept staring. Lowered his brows, as if wondering why she was even *asking*. "Are you?"

What?

"Water Tribe chieftains usually kill at least one guy to prove they're the man for the job," Zuko went on, as if he didn't know every word was acid. "And that's just in your tribes. Ask some historians what blue sails meant to people before Sozin's war." He shrugged. "My ancestors were warriors. I know that. Sozin was a monster. Kuzon was a spy; trust me, he didn't make it to his nineties by being *nice*. I don't even have a name for Shidan's father, but he was a dragon. That kind of says everything. And don't even get me started on Roku-"

"*Roku?*" She couldn't have heard that right. She couldn't have.

Liar. You know he's lying, fire always lies!

"Sokka said that, too." Zuko rubbed the side of his head, looking out at moonlit water. "Azulon married Ilah. One of Roku's daughters. So everybody in my family who's still alive is blood-related to an *idiot* Avatar. I think that explains a lot." He grimaced. "Shih's not here. Maybe we should search somewhere else? There's something weird about-"

"You're lying!" So easy to reach out and squeeze. A crook of arm and hands seized the red running through hidden veins, stopping those hateful, evil words. "*You're lying!*"

She'd stopped his heart. She'd *stopped his heart*.

Can't breathe, can't move, can't firebend - focus! You don't need breath, not if you've got-

Fighting for every twitch of his fingers, Zuko let the lantern drop.

Pull it - slap her - distract her, what the hell is she doing-?

Flames spun and slashed at her, pulled from lantern and oil. She flinched.

I can breathe.

It just wasn't doing any good. His lungs were dragging in air. His heart was beating. But the world was narrowing in as if neither of those were true, vision flashing as red as if he were trapped in a burning building, and all the strength his blood carried was smoke-

Blood.

He could feel his heartbeat. Feel his breath. But he couldn't feel his *pulse*.

She stopped my blood. How?

Flames sizzled and died, as Katara flicked her water over the lantern wick.

She's going to kill me.

He'd done deep dives before, but only with the chance to breathe first. Everything was fading from red to black; the way it had one horrible night, when a satin pillow had pushed down with Azula's implacable determination-

I will not die here!

Moss in the shadowed corners. Where there was moss, there was water.

He raked air toward him with both hands, yanking threads of moisture from night-chilled stone. Not enough to fight with...

But no matter how homicidal a bender might be, it was hard to ignore a palm-full of water crawling up your nose.

His pulse thundered back into motion, light surging back into the world.

He wanted to run. He desperately wanted to run, to put distance between himself and whatever insanity had possessed Katara this time.

But you don't need to see water to bend it.

Which meant whatever she'd done to halt his blood in its tracks - his *blood*, Agni, what the *hell* was that? - then the moment she got a chance to think-

Zuko punched fire at her, deliberately flashy, as Katara clawed water off her face. The waterbender snarled, a sudden handful of ice slapping flames away.

He whipped out a thin bolt of blazing heat, searing past her hip. Right through thick leather.

You fight like you train.

Katara had trained herself with that waterskin for months. She scooped her arms to gather up escaping water, focused on her damaged weapon.

Keep her focused on that, instead of the whole ocean down there-

For a moment, he was drowning.

The tribe casts you out, waves whispered at him. The chieftain's daughter has decided. Let go; let it end. For the good of the tribe...

Wrong tribe, bastard!

Zuko breathed flames, walling his mind off from water. Oh, Agni. It wasn't all her fault. Something had gotten to her, the way the haima-jiao had pulled Amaya under-

Katara raised a hand, and the waves rose with it. Impossibly tall, more white foam than water...

For a moment, he could almost hear Toph's voice. *Sparky? This is gonna suck.*

It was like trying to squash a flea-gnat. The moon was with her. The ocean was with her. If she could connect once, Zuko would be a bloody paste on the stones. But he wouldn't stop moving.

Fire flashed out to knife through her waves; scalding her arms, searing her dress to tatters. She hissed, and healed herself in an instant. But that was yet another moment she couldn't bind his blood, and when she raised her hands to seize his puppet strings-

Whips of flame, snapping at her fingers so she had to flinch out of the form. Tangling and coalescing to snare her in a fiery net. "Katara." Zuko's voice crackled like the flames. "There's something in the sea out there. I think it's a spirit. It's trying to get at you. At any waterbender. Remember Yugoda's training! Get your chi out of the ocean, before-"

Stupid! I've seen this before.

She clutched her arms to her chest before the net could close, armoring herself in a torrent of seawater. Flame hissed into steam, snuffed in an instant.

Now-

Seawater crackled into ice, solid as iron.

What?

Zuko stepped into the moonlight, hands still up in a form she knew all too well.

Pushing Wave. That's... not possible...

Northern bender! Snow-child! Kill it, kill it, kill it!

He's going to kill me!

Katara breathed out, sacrificing her breath to melt her arms free; splitting her icy prison with a desperate shrug. Water surged, knocking Zuko off his feet.

Enemy of the tribe. Die!

Her spray of ice needles sizzled in a desperate overhead kick of flames. Zuko whirled to his feet, a ring of fire rising about them both-

It was like being splashed with boiling water. The world narrowed down to a blinding white of pain.

What am I doing?

Wind roared.

"Katara! Are you okay?" No, no, what was he thinking, she wasn't *okay*, her dress was all burned and her waterskin had been seared through and there were ashes *everywhere*.

Aang reached to hug her; stopped, and waved a hand in front of her face. Katara was blinking, like she wasn't sure he was there. Like she wasn't sure *anything* was there, and thinking was as hard as putting thoughts together up where the air was so thin, even the condor-geese didn't hang around.

The air here wasn't anywhere near that dangerous, but Toph was screaming. Did kind of make it hard to think.

As did the grim look he was getting from Sokka, as the young tribesman gripped Toph by one shaking shoulder. Momo had already jumped off Sokka's shoulder, scampering back out of the room, ears lowered as if he wanted to hide. "Aang," Sokka said. "*Aang*. We need to-

"Whatever it is, we'll get to it later," Aang said impatiently. "Katara! How bad did he burn you?" After everything Zuko had said, about wanting to stop the war, and - he'd thought Zuko was telling the truth about wanting to help, how could he have been so *wrong*? "We'll get some water up here, you'll be okay-

"No water!" Katara shrank back. "There's something *in* the water down there, Aang! It was using the moon... it snuck inside my head and made everything twist around, I should have known it was wrong but I *didn't*. I just... went after him. He tried to stop me, even when I reached out, and... then the fire circle burned, but it burned that sneak more, and... then I heard you..."

Aang closed the distance between them, shaking his head. "Fire's scary. But you've got to think. Come on, Katara, you *never* go after people. Even Zuko-

"But I did." She was staring past his shoulder, eyes huge. "Aang. What did you *do*?"

"What did *I* do?" He blinked at her, and glanced that way. "Katara, Zuko was trying to-

The columns were gone.

Shards of their tops remained, like ragged teeth of stone. The rest - columns, railing, rust-rotted chains - all had been swept away. Like one of the great whirlwinds had touched down in the prayer hall, shredding it with claws of storm, before carrying the shattered remains out over an abyss of empty air.

There was - red and black and fire. Against the stone, before it...

No, no; he couldn't have done that, this had to be some kind of horrible mistake-

With a tortured squeak, a last bit of corroded copper broke loose and fell.

Toph wasn't screaming anymore. Just shaking under Sokka's hand, fists loose as if the master bender didn't know if she wanted to smash him with a boulder, or just open up a hole and drop away from the world. Her face was dead white.

Feet like lead, Aang trudged to the ragged edge wind had left behind. Below - way, way too far below - wind-raised foam still edged the waves, casting back glints of the setting moon.

The water was black and empty.

"I... he's not down there," Aang managed.

"You wouldn't see him if he was." Sokka's voice had no give in it. "Somebody that thin, doesn't float."

But... but that didn't make sense, if you didn't float you'd be fighting your way to the surface, because everybody needed to *breathe*-

No. *No*.

"I... I didn't *mean* to..."

"But you did." Katara shuddered, hand in front of her face like she thought she was going to be sick. "We did. We killed him."

Shaking loose from Sokka's hand, Toph fled.

Sparky's gone. Toph curled deeper into her self-carved cave, face hugged to her knees. *Zuko's gone. It's not fair...*

"May one join you?" A sense of presence against stone; weightless, yet obviously there. "Many tears have stained these stones."

Toph swiped at her face with a grubby hand. "I'm not crying. I'm mad!"

"Ah. Then that makes two of us."

The ghost still had no weight, but Toph felt shifts in stone as Shih's energy chilled it.

"One's temper is stretched... very thin, at the moment," Shih went on. "A spiderweb can still prevail against a hurricane if it is only wind. But if the web is poked..." A long sigh. "I should have warded the Temple better. I knew the currents had brought death and pain from the North, and the invasion would only have roiled matters further. In truth, I *did* ward the Temple." A pause. "Against spirits."

Toph swallowed, tasting salt. "That wasn't a spirit?"

"One thinks not." She could hear Shih's frown. "Had it been a creature of that other world, the young prince would not have fared so badly. No spirit strikes at a dragon-child and walks away unscathed."

And that just grabbed her heart and squeezed. "Strikes? Zuko's *dead!*" Dead, and it was all her friends' fault, she couldn't *believe* Aang had done that after all his spirity blah-blah about life being precious, didn't want to kill anyone - sure, don't kill *Ozai*, who was all kinds of scary-bad, but when it came to Zuko-

"Are you certain?"

She couldn't see this ghost unless he wanted her to see him. Didn't stop her from making a real good guess where the front of his shirt would be, and grabbing. "*Talk.*"

"Erk." Shih squirmed to loosen phantasmal cloth from his throat. "Toph. Prince Zuko is a dragon-child, with an unfinished task. If the Avatar's strike, or the fall, had killed him..."

"Bingo," Toph got out. "One really ticked-off ghost." It hurt. So much. "You... you think...?"

"I cannot be sure," Shih warned. "But I do not *know* that he is dead. And if there is one thing all the world knows of Sozin's line, it is that they are very hard to kill. Zuko... were that spirit unhoused from mortal flesh and bone, I think that I would know. I think we all would know."

It hurt to hope. More than anything. "Then - that means he's out there. In the water. A-and we don't even know where to start looking." And it would have to be *looking*, darn it. "I hate that I can't see in water. I hate it! What good's bending if I can't find my friends when they need me?"

"Ah, little one... Toph." Cool fingers brushed her hot cheek. "Even for those with eyes, finding a life cast to the ocean is no easy task. Without knowledge of the tides and winds, one might as well search for one spilled grain in a firestorm. And at night? Red and black vanish in the darkness, especially when wet." Now the chill rested on the top of her head. "If he lives, he *does* need you. To stay safe, and keep your friends from foolishness. I can protect the waterbenders now that I know there is a threat. So long as they are *here*. Outside these walls - my strength cannot venture." A puff of air, like a breath of autumn in summer's heat. "You are of age to learn the first rule of rescues. And that, is this: *do not become another victim*. Before you can save another, you *must* know you can save yourself."

Toph sniffed. Pulled on an angry face; she wasn't crying. No matter how messed up this was. "You're saying I can't help him?"

...And her voice was *not* wobbling. It wasn't.

"I am saying, young master of Earth, that if your friend yet lives, he thanks Agni that *he* is in the water, and you are *not*," Shih said sternly. "These are Fire Nation waters. He has traveled among these islands. Swum these seas. If any of you would have a chance to survive this, he would."

"But I felt Aang hit him." Toph could barely get the words out. She could still feel that shock through the floor as Zuko had been blown off his feet. Still hear the eerie silence, before the distant splash. "He hit him really hard."

"I know." Shih gathered her into his arms. "I know."

Chapter End Notes

Diamond dust is cool, literally. Check it out on Wikipedia. It's a near-ground cloud of tiny ice crystals, and while you can see it anywhere it gets significantly below freezing, it's most common near the poles. Water Tribes would be familiar with it. Fire Nation? Heh. No.

Chapter 78

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Pain. The jagged, broken kind of pain that meant there was something... really wrong.

What... where...?

Not cold; not warm. Wet, dragging at skin and hair and clothing. Salt on his lips, lapping over his face, and a sandpapery bump that brought tears to his eyes as it jarred broken ribs-

Oh hell no!

Zuko's hand scythed through water, a searing froth that boiled and blackened the leopard-shark's skin from eye to gills, battering it aside so only the wave of its rush slashed him. Instead of the teeth. Lots and lots of teeth.

I need to get out of the water.

It hurt to move. And if it hurt this much when the ocean was holding him up, he didn't want to think about-

Don't think. Just do!

He lifted both hands as much as he could, focusing on the feel of water around and under him. Pressure, lifting, the uneven sway that wasn't at all like a boat...

The leopard-shark hit ice, jarring him to the bone.

Oh yeah. Something's definitely broken. A lot of somethings.

Pain was a warning. He'd been warned. *Keep moving.*

Zuko blinked past red flashes in his vision, peering through the cloudy ice cupping him, trying to see where his would-be predator-

Another jarring - blinding - crash.

Don't move. Just breathe.

The leopard-shark circled ice, eye rolling at the broken human somehow out of reach.

Focus. Letting his hands sink back into the pool of seawater cupped in ice with him, Zuko lifted them again. Not as high as the first time, passing out would be *bad...*

And again. And again, ice wobbling and steadying under him as it rose up through the waves. The leopard-shark circled at a distance, blackened gills on one side of it still trying to pump even as a pale wash of blood wisped into the water-

Darkness flashed under the surface like lightning.

Zuko hissed another stream of curses, fighting off pain as the thump of displaced water wobbled his improvised iceberg...

The leopard-shark was gone.

What. The. Hell?

Broken ribs or not, Zuko raised more ice. An inch higher above the water, two...

Something brushed against the layer of frozen seawater beneath him. Slowly. Deliberately.

Not good.

Dark and sleek, like a koala-otter's wet fur. Sinuous as a dragon-fly, despite what looked like a swelling bruise along one side of a thick, furred neck. And *teeth*.

Zuko had a very, very good view of the teeth, as the long, noseless snout poked over the edge of his ice. Like a zebra-seal's, but bigger; each tooth long as his hand, recurved, and serrated on the back edge for tearing chunks out of prey still living. Ivory was still tinged with a wash of red, glistening as a tongue swept over them and quested outward-

Flicking fingers, Zuko raised ice between himself and being tasted. Held his breath as pink flesh brushed over frozen water...

A *shush* of fur slipping into water, and it was gone.

...That was too easy.

He couldn't see much in the water past the glint of sun on waves. He couldn't see that furred, saw-toothed unknown lingering in the water.

Which didn't mean it wasn't there.

He couldn't swear to how big it was. He hadn't seen more than teeth and snout and fur. But it was *big*. Sky bison big. Big enough he'd be a few nicely-sized bites. It could be waiting.

...Which would mean it was smart enough to look for food inside ice. Terrific.

I'm dead.

Not a joke. Not a whimper. Cold, calculated realization.

I'm in the middle of the ocean. I've got no clue where. I've got broken ribs, broken who knows what else, my only float is a chunk of ice, and something wants to eat me. Something with really, really big teeth-

He knew those teeth.

A kadzhait. That's a kadzhait in the water.

For a moment, his eyes stung with something that wasn't pain. A thousand years. Over a thousand years, and Koh hadn't won. Water's spirit-animals were still out there.

They're alive. He wanted to pump a fist at the heavens, and shout it to a particular Face-Stealer's face. *The walking whales are alive!*

...And this one wanted to eat him.

It's not just a walking whale.

Not if it was hanging around to tear him into little bite-size pieces. That wasn't just a kadzhait. That was a *sea serpent*.

Of course. What else would I fall into the ocean on top of?

...No wonder Katara went berserk.

She'd trained as a combat waterbender, not a healer. And she'd trained fast. The North Pole being what it was, the Avatar being who *he* was - that meant she'd trained under Pakku.

Amaya had had a lot to say about Pakku.

He trains teenagers, not kids. Not people just starting out with waterbending.

Amaya had assumed her student knew nothing about waterbending. Firebenders created flames with their chi. They never had a reason to keep some mental distance between their spirit's energies and the element they bent. Amaya had had to teach him that from scratch, like a particularly grumpy toddler.

If it grabbed her through her water - Katara didn't stand a chance.

Though at the moment, he was a lot more worried about his own chances.

No one's going to come looking for me. I saw Aang's face when he blew me out of that hall. He's not going to let anyone come looking for the evil firebender who hurt his precious waterbender.

Toph would look. Toph would try.

But Toph couldn't see in water. She'd never find him.

This is all my fault. My own, stupid fault.

Granted, that scene in the prayer hall had looked bad. If you couldn't sense the *wrongness* in the ocean - and he was starting to think Aang didn't sense things until they lurched out of the water and tried to *strangle* him - then, yes, it definitely looked bad. But he still hadn't expected to get blasted off a cliff-

Because you felt like you were in the Fire Nation, Zuko swore silently. Idiot!

To Fire Nation eyes, it would have looked like Katara had tried to kill him, and he'd tried to kill her back. Simple. Obvious. And a *fair fight*, meaning nobody with any sense got in the middle of it until someone died or surrendered.

Nobody with sense. From the *Fire Nation*.

Aang wasn't Fire Nation. Aang was the *Avatar*.

Teruko was right. The Fire Nation can't trust the Avatar. Ever.

He'd tried, because not even a Fire Sage like Shiyu could teach a firebender if he didn't trust his student. He'd *tried*.

Bad mistake.

Bad enough to get him killed. And he did *not* want to die here. His people needed him. His *family* needed him.

And... Toph would be sad.

Get real. Toph would kick your ass and start yelling about how stupid it is for a waterbender to drown.

And an angry Toph was a scary, scary thought. She knew about spirits. She'd find a Fire Sage to drag him back some far-off ghost watch, just so she could kick his *spirit's* ass.

"And that is *not* going to happen," Zuko said under his breath. Glared out at the waves, that might or might not be hiding a monster. "You hear me, Tui? I am *not* going to die here. My nation isn't Zhao. My nation isn't *Sozin*. You want me dead? You're going to have to come get me!"

Silence. Only the slap of waves, the quiet creaks of ice in warmer water.

"I am not going to die," Zuko breathed. "Maybe you'll kill me. But I am a son of Fire, and I *will not* surrender."

Steadying breath. And *ow*.

First things first. Ribs. Zuko winced again, as salt stung cracking lips. *And then, fresh water.*

Still cracked, Zuko judged, feeling along half-healed ribs with water-wrapped fingers. *Not good. But... not as bad as it was.*

He was out of the water now, clothes wrung dry with a flutter of fingers. Seawater stole your body heat a lot faster than air. Even without a sea serpent waiting to snack on him, staying in the water would have been a slow death.

Though he'd separated out some fresh water to rinse off *before* he'd put dry clothes on. Even months later, the memory of the sores eaten into his skin by seawater and all the little lives in it was vivid, ugly, and almost as painful as watching corpses drift by their raft. Three weeks adrift with sea vultures circling had taught him more ways the ocean could kill him than he had ever wanted to know.

The sea doesn't care if you live or die. The sea just is. If you pay attention, if you do everything right - maybe it won't kill you. Yet.

So. Rules of survival. Shelter, water, fire, and food.

Shelter, check. Not the best shelter, drifting on ice in these waters meant he had to keep reinforcing it as it melted. But it definitely beat drifting like a log in the current with a kadzhait snaking through the water.

Speaking of. Water, check; he currently had quite a bit pooled in a hollow in the ice. Which was a much, *much* better situation than he'd been in the last time he'd been lost at sea. So long as he could concentrate enough to bend water away from everything else, thirst wasn't going to kill him.

And fire, check. As long as his chi held out.

Shouldn't be a problem, if the sun comes up soon... Zuko craned his head back to eye the constellations through thin patches of cloud. *Midsummer. If the Manriki-Gusari is that high over the horizon, and the Ko-Manriki is raised for the kill... ah, hell. It's not even midnight yet.*

Not good. But if he could see the Ko-Manriki's haft, then he knew where north was. If he could put

that together with the direction of the current-

Ice shuddered under him. Red sparks of pain flashed in his vision.

...Yeah. Don't think starving is going to be my main problem...

After a while it got into a rhythm. Thump, pain, reinforce the ice. Thump. Pain. Reinforce.

But rhythms were good, no matter how painful. Rhythms let part of your brain handle surviving on automatic, while the rest of a terrified mind tried to sit on panic and *think*.

Lost at sea. Nobody knows where I am. Going to die- Stop that!

Okay. The key problem here was *lost*. So how did he get un-lost?

There's the Ko-Manriki. That's north. So I got blown off the east side of the southernmost of the Temple Islands...

Blown off by unstoppable winds, fueled by an airbender's fury. All an Avatar's fury, turned on him-

Aang. Isn't. Here. Zuko stuffed that nightmare back into a box, and studied the glory of stars above, diamonds scattered above the black silk of thickening clouds. I was blown east, then washed out by the tide. I don't know where I am exactly, but it doesn't matter. I wasn't out that long. I can't be more than a few miles out. Probably. What I need to know is, am I still in an offshore tide, or am I all the way out in the Black Current?

He pulled up some of the ice into a thin shield against the wind, and broke off more in curved fragments. Hugged one arm against the worst of his ribs, and threw.

A scattering of white ice thumped into the waves. Bobbed almost under the surface; rose up, and started drifting.

Zuko licked a finger, and checked the wind. Waited-

Thump. Ow. Damn it.

It's gone all the way around my iceberg, Zuko realized. Bet it's going to try something else this time - gah!

Ice slooshed into water underneath him, soaking his shoes before he could jump aside. The translucent tunnel of water bored deeper, down to where a suddenly-visible head was directly under where he'd been standing, massive tongue fluttering to bend ice back into flowing sea-

Zuko bared his teeth, and snapped a dart of flame down.

Steam geysered back up. Ice shuddered with a terrible moan, as a howl seemed to shake through his bones.

Balancing on wobbling ice, Zuko snapped his arms out in a push to freeze the hole-

Pain. Whiting out the world.

-Grit his teeth, and lurched through Pushing Wave; north, south, east, and west.

Solid ice sheeted out over the waves, locking in scattered fragments.

It won't melt through that in a hurry. Zuko breathed shallowly, waiting for the sea serpent's next move. *Huh. Current's going... mostly north. Looks like I am in the Black Current.*

On the one hand, that was reason for panic. Heading north, to empty, colder water.

On the other - he hadn't been in the water that long. The Black Current was strong, but not fast. Given time, yes, it would get him to treacherous, uninhabited waters. But right now? It could be one of his best allies.

The current pushes north past all the Western Air Islands. For the next few days, I'll be heading past land.

I just need to get to it.

A spray of breath, turning to icy fog in the cloud-dimmed night. Sparkles of it drifted roughly southward, quiet as mist.

Shaping an arced wall of ice at a right angle to the strengthening wind, Zuko rolled his eyes. "If you're trying to be ominous, it's not working."

Dark fur slipped under the water, not even a ripple left behind.

"Oh, right. 'You don't know where I am, so I could be anywhere.' Come on." Zuko raised his voice. "My little sister was scarier than you! When she was *six*!"

Ice cracked, webbed claws tearing it into long gashes of seawater with a flex of one massive paw.

"That's where I thought you were," Zuko murmured. Clasped his hands together in front of him; twisted a fast figure-eight left, and push *forward*-

Shards of ice exploded outward. Some were blocked by fur and hide, poofing into harmless snowfall. Others...

In the webs between claws, shards drew blood.

"Get lost!" Zuko yelled, as the sea serpent yanked back its paw with an indignant squeal. "You want me out of your waters? Fine! *I* want me out of your waters. Go find someone else to gnaw on!"

Predators don't like to get hurt. Why the hell is it still wasting time with me?

Obviously, he hadn't made himself a painful enough meal. Yet.

Or it really is a sea serpent.

Langxue had said they were supposed to be like dark dragons. Just as alien to human ways of thinking. And just as smart.

Which means it holds a grudge. Not because I hurt it. Because I'm alive, and I'm not alone.

Except he was alone. Just a speck of life lost in the ice and currents. No one to search for him. No one to help. Only himself, and the waiting hunger of the sea...

Zuko stopped himself before he'd gone two steps toward the water, dragging sanity back like a lead chain. *Toph would look for me if she could.*

And it didn't matter that she couldn't. She was out there, and she cared. He was not going to disappoint the Blind Bandit by giving up just because of one measly little ocean. He'd done this before. He could do this.

But not alone...

Zuko planted a hand above his knee before he could take another step, and glared at the waiting water beyond the edge of ice. "Oh. That's you." He smirked, no matter how badly his nerves had tied themselves in knots. "I thought I was just having a bad night."

Deliberately turned his back, and stalked back toward the ice shield.

Three. Two. One-

Years baiting Azula paid off. He dropped and spun before the lurch of ice that heralded an angry sea serpent clawing its way up out of the water like a zebra-seal.

..Bad idea.

Chest and lungs felt like he'd been impaled with flint shards. But the spray of deadly ice-needles sailed harmlessly over his head, and he had just enough breath to lift his right hand and snap it outward.

The fire-whip slashed out and up, scoring a long black sear down his enemy's snout. The sea serpent jerked its head back and left, limber neck shifting its head away and spearing ice up to impale Zuko's arm-

Something in furred muscle seemed to seize. The ice-spears melted even as they tapped cloth; drips turning to a summer-melt that sheeted across the berg and down, dropping the sea serpent back into the ocean with an indignant squeal.

It couldn't move its neck through the form. Zuko got to his knees, breathing shallowly, smoothing air with his fingertips to seal the hole with a sheet of opaque ice, black in the dark before dawn. He still felt that pressure of *alone* and *despair*... but he'd fought through worse nights. *That bruise. Has to be recent; it's still getting worse. It fumbled the form, so it melted the ice instead of spearing me. What the heck could have tangled with something that big-*

The answer smacked him like a meteor, and Zuko started to snicker. Oh, it hurt to laugh. But he had to. "He got you, too!"

Fury, all but bubbling from the sea.

"He did." Zuko smirked, dragon-sharp. "There you were, having fun twisting Katara around in your schemes. Then the whole sky caves in." Another careful, shallow snicker. "Avatars and stone walls. No wonder Great-Grandfather built the new palace based on wood." He tried not to giggle. "You know the funny part? He *didn't even know you were there!*"

Fury. Pain. Hatred, like a drowning wave.

Zuko clung to the reality of cloth sleeves under his fingers and fire in his core. He wasn't aching in the water. He was not-

Alone, cast out, not-of-the-pod. Claws and tails poised to slash the ocean against him; water roiling as elder-females held back a young dam yowling her loss, oh the taste of tender flesh had been so sweet...

"Sick," Zuko breathed, staring up at the fading milky river of stars, just barely visible through the clouds scudding across the sky. Common sense said he shouldn't take his eyes off the water. But his last bout drifting had taught him he needed to look at *something* beyond the disaster he was in the middle of, or he'd dive right into panic. With a sea serpent gouging at his mind... he couldn't afford panic. "Sick, and stupid. Even Azula isn't that crazy. What did you think they were going to do after that? Ignore it? Let you stay?"

Something dragged at the ice, like a thousand grasping hands.

Drowned? But if there were drowned in the water they'd be coming after me by now, not just grabbing the ice-

It was still too dark, too long before dawn to see the water as more than shifting black. But the scents were different here. Not the clean salt of deep ocean water. More of a tang of sea wrack, decaying kelp blades broken loose and drifting...

Yes!

Something *was* dragging at the ice. Something even the keenest eyes couldn't spot from the water's surface. You had to be underwater, deep under; or crow's-nest high above it, looking through blue waves forty and more feet down, where the sun's heat barely touched.

In colder seas, kelp grew to the surface. In Fire Nation waters - it stayed deep.

But the kelp's holdfast needs to get some light, it can't be more than a few hundred feet down... I'm in the shallows! If I can just keep the ice angled so the wind pushes me east-

Wind hurled the downdraft that meant *storm*, rain pouring down in torrents that twisted sea and ice and sky into one.

Screaming blackness rolled his spirit under.

You hope! You dare to hope, to believe in human-pod that only deserves death! Die! Die! Die!

Blinded, soaked, heart racing with terror, Zuko pulled his chi out of the water. All of it. *Breathe. Have to breathe, have to center-*

Ahhh yes... Water splashed; one massive limb surfacing, shaking water off fur. A low rumble, a waft of cold air...

Zuko blinked rain out of his eyes to see a third of his iceberg slide away, cut razor-clean by one flick of claws. *Oh hell.*

He scrambled through gusts of rain as the berg moaned and shifted, lightened side shuddering up and up out of the water-

The kadhait flicked its snout, melting an ice-chunk on the opposite side to send his shrunken haven rolling back the other way.

"Cute," Zuko snarled, slipping and gripping slick wet ice to try and center himself over the largest lump left. Just like Azula. Only worse. Azula tortured things to make sure Ozai never forgot his

avored child. This creature tormented just for the pain. Because there were bonds that should have held a kadzhait, heart-ties of love and family every sane being counted on to survive, and *this* male just didn't have them...

He's not sane.

He's going to keep hunting humans. Hunting waterbenders - and after he's done with me, he'll go back after Katara. And Aang.

The Avatar's mind, pulled under by a sea-serpent's hate. Kesuk all over again. He could almost hear Koh laughing-

Ice shivered, yet another shred of safety calving off into the rippling ocean.

He's a kadzhait, Zuko thought, scrambling grimly back to his knees. *A miracle. But... I can't let him get away.*

Calm welled up in him like lava. He couldn't use water. The few knives he still had on him likely wouldn't get through the sleek fur, much less the hide and blubber armoring the kadzhait's vitals. He'd used up most of his chi just surviving, and in the middle of the damned *ocean* there was no fire to pull from-

Yes. There is.

It was raining, and he was about to die. Again.

But *this* time, he wasn't chi-blocked.

Probably won't work. But a little less ice, and I'm dead anyway. "Your name!" Zuko roared, as yet another avalanche of ice melted and slid away. "You called me a snow-child? Then I swim under the moon's light, just as you do! I want the name of the swimmer who would slay me!"

A furred tail-fin slapped the water, three harsh cracks. *No pod. No name! Die!*

Calm. Like a pool of waiting lava. Like the unseen sparks that clung to every drop of rain, cold fire flowing from the storm for any with the heart to feel it...

He swept his arms as if casting a net, gathering shreds of lightning. The ancient way. The *dragon's* way; when the clans went to war in storms, and a twist of wings separated the quick from the dead. "You first!"

Thunder split the sea.

Teeth, drifting in dark water.

Don't want those near me.

Rational thought seemed to pop in and out like a loose tooth. He was in the water. That wasn't good. Near something dead, which also wasn't good-

Fadeout. Squawks and clicks. A pressure, bobbing him back to the surface.

Wind out there? Okay. Breathe....

A distant *crack-thump*; sails catching wind.

The rising sun gave him a spark of energy; enough to see shadows on storm-lit water, and billows of wet cloth rising black against the sky.

What color are the sails?

How do I fix this?

Katara huddled against the cliff wall, arms pulling her knees to her chest as the first rays of sun peeked through the storm, painting the seas below. It was beautiful up here. Even now, with half the hall in ruins.

I'm supposed to be holding us all together. Not ripping us apart. I'm supposed to be the responsible one.

Except - she was afraid that was exactly what had gotten Zuko killed.

Katara tucked her chin to her knees, testing that painful thought. She was the responsible one. She kept Aang grounded, when he wanted to just fly away and have fun. She was the one who told them all what was right.

And Aang let me. She swallowed hard. Because figuring out what's right is hard. And... Aang doesn't do hard. Aang's a kid.

And taking care of kids was her *life*. Except for waterbending. Gran-Gran had made that clear for years. So when yet another kid was dumped in her lap - and Aang was so hopeless at surviving on his own, he couldn't *be* anything else - she'd just... taken over.

He let me decide what was right. And I was wrong.

So now Aang was rooms away, buried in Appa's fur. And Toph was hiding with a ghost, and Sokka was-

"Hey, Sis."

She looked up, throat tight. "Sokka?"

Sword sheathed over his shoulder, Sokka stood over her, face grave. Sighed, and went down to one knee, arms open.

She clutched his tunic, burying her face in his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I made an awful mistake. I'm *sorry...*"

"I got you, Sis," Sokka said quietly. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Toph - Aang was out there in the dark..."

"Toph's dug into a wall, and I told Aang not to go near her," Sokka reported. "Aang finally figured out you were serious about the tides washing anything that might have made it through the fall out to sea. He tried to drag me out on Appa to look some more, but Shih showed up, *with* a sword, and - whoof. I didn't catch everything he said, but there was something in there about Kuzon, and *faces turned away*; whatever that is. Aang looks like somebody smacked him over the head with a boulder. Which, you know, I kind of wish I'd done a while ago." He took a deep breath. "I've still got Zuko's maps. It won't be easy, but - if Shiyu's in Boiling Rock, we can get him out."

It was like a thrown boulder to her gut. "Sokka, you don't understand! Aang - and I - we can't go on

like this!"

"No. We can't," Sokka said flatly. "But what you, and Aang, and all of us have to fix between us, doesn't change what we have to do for everyone else. The Fire Lord's still out to take over the world. The Face-Stealer's still after humans. We don't get to quit just because it turned into a disaster. We're responsible for people-"

"That's how the water-spirit got me!" She didn't want to say this. But she had to. "I'm supposed to be responsible for my tribe. My family. I'm supposed to help people who need me. To protect them. And... it made me think..."

Sokka almost said something. Shook his head, and waited.

Katara winced. "It made me think I had to protect you from Zuko."

Sokka let out a slow breath. "Why?" His tone wasn't accusing, as he waved at the room. Just curious. "What did he do that made you think we couldn't trust him?"

"Nothing." Katara rubbed at the goosebumps on her arms. It felt like the words had thorns, as she tore them out of her throat. "He didn't *do* anything. He was just here. Looking at the prayer hall like he *cared*. The same temple where his great-grandfather... killed everyone."

Sokka fingered the end of his wolf tail, obviously thinking over the best thing to say. "Except Fire Lord Sozin didn't kill everyone here. And you know why. Temul. Kuzon-"

"I *know*." Katara gritted her teeth. "But it didn't matter. He didn't even act *ashamed*. And then when he lied about one of his great-grandfathers being *Avatar Roku*-!"

"He wasn't lying."

She stared at her brother.

"Sozin and Roku used to be friends, remember?" Sokka reminded her. "Aang saw that in Roku's vision. And Roku's family didn't know what happened to him. They just knew he was gone. So later, when Sozin had a son... Ilah married him. Fire Lord Ozai, Iroh, Azula - they're *all* Roku's grandkids. And great-grandkids."

No way. "That's..." Katara shuddered. "*Azula*? Is the Avatar's..."

"Yeah," Sokka sighed. "I knew about that. I guess Zuko thought you knew it, too. And that's my fault. I should have talked to you about Roku's family. We should have talked about a lot of things. But we didn't, because..." His shoulders slumped. "I was ashamed. I couldn't protect you guys from Temul. All I could do was give her another target."

That sent ice-spiders down her neck. "Sokka? What did you do?"

"When we're in the Fire Nation, Temul shows up at night," Sokka said bluntly. "She teaches me, when you guys aren't around. The same way Master Piandao would if he could be there. Mostly by kicking my butt," he admitted. "I didn't want you to know."

She'd *liked* Master Piandao. She wished they could have stayed longer, for Sokka's sake. Even if there was a cranky ghost hanging around. But the Avatar couldn't stay in one place too long... and she knew enough about the great names now to know that one traveling around the Fire Nation with them would have made Aang an even *bigger* target.

And all of Shu Jing would have been in trouble with the Fire Lord. Domain lords aren't like chiefs, but... they're still supposed to be responsible for their people.

So the cranky ghost is training Sokka instead. Katara wanted to rub at a headache. Why does that seem like the Fire Nation all over?

Still, she gave her brother a look askance. "Me, or Aang?"

"Kind of both," Sokka shrugged. "She doesn't like Aang. And don't know if you've noticed, but Aang doesn't like things he *can't* bend out of his way."

Katara swallowed. "I noticed." She tried not to shiver. "Is that... is that why you didn't tell Aang Zuko's a waterbender?"

Sokka whistled. "You saw that, huh?"

Not just a trick of her eyes. "How? That's - it's not possible-"

"It is," Sokka said bluntly. "I figured it out the other day. And I've been kicking myself for not putting it together after we met Langxue. Toph *told* us Lee was a waterbender."

"She knew." That hurt. "Why didn't she tell us?"

"Why didn't you show Aang that firebender's helmet, way back at the Southern Temple?" Sokka said pointedly.

"I didn't want him hurt! We knew what it was like to - to lose people to the Fire Nation. And there wasn't anything he could do, it happened so long ago..." Katara swallowed, thinking about that snowy cliffside. And what had happened afterward. "That didn't work out so well, did it?"

"I dunno, maybe it did," Sokka shrugged. "If he'd gone all glowy-eyes Windball of Doom out there, where we didn't have much to duck behind - might have been bad." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Though man, if I'd known he could do that, I might not have jumped into that airball game. Getting thumped off posts is one thing. Facing down a tornado? Not my idea of a good time."

"Right. The airball court." Katara smiled, remembering happier times. "I was so glad you were there, even if you were my annoying big brother. You really helped him feel better..."

Except Aang feeling better had come from walking right over her brother. Who didn't know the rules. Who couldn't airbend.

Like Toph, who'd been blasted out of the ring, losing her championship and her pride, to an attack she literally couldn't see coming.

Like Zuko, who'd been so busy trying to save both of them from the Thing in the water, he'd never had a chance to protect himself.

Sokka was holding her shoulders, bracing her as she covered her face with her hands. "Katara? Tell me what's wrong. Please."

Katara took one deep breath. Another. "Toph was right."

"Yeah?" Sokka's eyebrows were up, confused.

"Not just because of me," Katara admitted. "I would have been upset. I *am* upset. But..." She

hunted for the right words. "Aang would have been worse. He's used to being special." Oh, this wasn't easy. "Like I was."

"Katara, you are special," Sokka told her, not a trace of goofiness on his face. "You're just not perfect. Who is?" He sighed. "Don't know if it helps, but... pretty sure Zuko would have told you he wasn't special. A Fire Nation prince, stuck as a waterbender? The spirits couldn't have messed him up worse if they'd tried."

She gave him a disbelieving look.

Sokka let go, one finger drawing a little circle in the air. "Turn it around. How would you feel if you started throwing sparks?" He grimaced. "How would the whole tribe feel?"

Katara shivered. Even imagining it made the floor want to drop out from under her. "I would have felt tainted," she got out. "But Aang would never understand that. He's the Avatar. He's *supposed* to bend other elements. That's what all his teachers told him. The one person in all the world who can bend all the elements. That makes him special." She met her brother's eyes. "You keep telling him he's special because he's *Aang*, not because he's the Avatar. But... I don't think he believes you."

"I think part of him's *scared* to believe me." Sokka looked at the stone rubble where copper domes had hung. "If he's special because he's Aang, then that means he's different. Because he's *Aang*, not the Avatar. And the Air Monks... I don't think they did *different* too well. Harmonious accord - ugh." He grimaced. "So. Yeah. I didn't *ask* Zuko if he could waterbend, and he never *said* he could. We kind of agreed to keep it quiet." Blue eyes rolled skyward. "I should've known better. Spirits always find a way to get you when you try something like that."

Katara shook her head. "Sokka, spirits don't try to get you."

Her brother raised an eyebrow. Which was so much like their father doing it, it just wasn't fair. "Hei Bai," Sokka said plainly. "Wan Shi Tong. Red octopus-spider things that go after stray earthbenders. Whatever went after you last night. Let's not even get into drowned zombies and one really cranky volcano. And the Painted Lady-" He cut himself off, face haunted. "I thought we'd lost you. I thought this was going to end up just like Gran-Gran's story about the ghost wife, dragging her whole family down with the net her husband found her bones in."

But that was just a story, Katara almost said.

Except the Avatar had been a story, too.

She'd trespassed on a river-spirit's name. And just like Gran-Gran's stories said, if you took something from the spirits and they didn't like it, you'd be lucky if all they did was slap you.

But I didn't mean to. I made a mistake.

Stone grated on stone, as another bit of shattered rock fell into the void.

"Do you think the spirits care?" Katara asked, voice low. "If we make mistakes."

Her brother looked at her, and broken stone, and sighed. "I think some of them care. The Painted Lady tried to let you go as soon as she could. Yue - she's tried to help all of us, right? And the past Avatars have tried to help Aang. Kind of. Though somebody needs to tell Kyoshi that *maybe* all the truth all the time isn't the best policy when we're trying not to get boiled in oil."

Oof, yes. Avatar Kyoshi had been impressive enough to scare a whole army into running. Except

Kyoshi hadn't stuck around, and a twelve-year-old airbender convinced of his own innocence wasn't going to impress anyone into admitting how idiotic their laws were.

"Some of them care," Sokka repeated. "But some of them can't figure humans out with a map and a compass. It took the *Avatar* for Hei Bai to get that a bunch of villagers didn't burn down his forest. What would have happened if Aang had still been an airbender-sicle? Or even if he'd been like Roku, living on some backwater island with his family, weeks away from where the trouble was? We got lucky. They got lucky." Sokka looked at shattered stone, and shook his head. "Aang's used to bouncing around the world and always ending up in the right place at the right time. To tossing his bending around everywhere, and getting *lucky*." He glanced at her, face quiet and sad. "How many Zukos do you think are out there, Sis? How many people who just aren't lucky?"

"You always told me a real warrior doesn't depend on luck," Katara objected. "Aang's not a warrior. And he never wants to be."

"That means he's got to be even better," Sokka stated. "A good swordsman can kill somebody. It takes a great swordsman to disarm them without killing them. Aang wants to never kill anybody else, ever again? Then he can't depend on luck. He's got to be good, and he's got to be careful. And he's got to start thinking before he blasts things all over the place." Sokka snapped out a hand toward the ruined pillars; the same kind of sharp motion Katara had seen Zuko use to deflect Azula's flames. "Or does he think the Fire Lord's going to stand on the edge of a handy cliff? Oops, sorry, I didn't mean to kill anybody, but boy, isn't it a good thing he's dead?"

"Well, wouldn't it be?" Katara challenged him. "Wouldn't it be better for everyone?"

"Not for Aang." Her brother's eyes were hard, but sad. "Think about it, Sis."

I don't want to!

But not thinking - about her own hate, about why she'd suddenly wanted Zuko dead - had hurt her family enough already. She was responsible. She could do this.

Katara swallowed, mouth dry. "He'd be lying to himself," she said in a small voice. "He'd say he tried to do the right thing, when he just... took the easy way out. But he's a kid, Sokka. He shouldn't have to do something this hard!"

"He's a kid," Sokka agreed heavily. "That's why he has to do it the hard way. He's the Avatar. Like it or not, want to be or not, he's the Avatar. If the guy who can call up the power of the whole world always takes the easy way out - spirits. We'd be better off stuffing him in a metal box with Bumi and taking on Ozai ourselves. It'd be awful. It'd be ugly. But Aang wouldn't be lying to himself about what he did. And didn't do." He winced. "Once you start lying like that, where do you stop?"

She chafed her arms for warmth, fingers rubbing against skin and leather. "Do you think you can stop lying now?"

"Katara, that's - darn it." Sokka looked aside, guilty. "Okay. You got me on that one. It's just - what's Dad going to say? Temul adopted me. I don't think he's going to want to share with a ghost."

"Dad," Katara said confidently, "is going to march right up to that ghost and tell her to stop taking things that don't belong to her. Then we can all argue it out." She nodded, decisive. "A good master cares about his students. If she's as good a teacher as you say she is, she'll talk to him."

"Probably more like growl, snarl, and hmph," Sokka said wryly. "Are you okay?"

"If you didn't know how to fight with a sword, then in the invasion..." She didn't want to think

about it. "I don't think it's right. But I'll yell at her later."

Sokka looked at her askance. "Wasn't what I was talking about."

"No," Katara said at last. "No, I'm not. I wanted this to be like the stories. The Avatar comes back and saves us all. But Aang's not like the stories."

"He's just a guy, trying to do the right thing," Sokka agreed. "Like the rest of us. And sometimes, even when we're trying, we really screw up." He raised his brows, in a look of mock surprise.

"Even you."

"Gee. Thanks," Katara said dryly.

"Yeah?" Sokka's grin had just a little hope in it.

"Yeah," Katara sighed. She felt the weight of the world lighten, just a little. "I kept trying to do everything just right, Sokka. I worked so hard on my bending, and Aang makes it look so easy, and then Master Pakku said I had to train him..."

"Master Piandao said, when you're in the middle of a fight, you don't have time for perfect," Sokka reminded her. "You do it as well as you can, and you try to stay alive. And you hope the people fighting with you have your back, because you're going to screw up somehow. Loose rocks on the field. Earthbenders out of nowhere. Fog rolls in, and nobody can see three inches in front of their face. Things happen." He shrugged. "You're not perfect. Aang's not. We'll deal." He took a deep breath. "Come on. We've got to talk to an earthbender about breaking into a prison in the middle of a caldera. A prison with chi-blockers."

Brr. "Are you sure we should?" Katara asked, heart hurting. "Zuko was going to be doing this with us. And whatever was out there..."

"We'll make it work." Sokka shrugged, and gave her a stubborn smile. "Even if everything else goes wrong... I'm pretty sure there won't be any water spirits to go after you in a volcano."

Chapter End Notes

I feel compelled to add an obligatory "don't try this at home". I've tried to do the research, but I am not a survival expert.

Of course, if you do end up in the middle of the ocean with a giant killer-whale-type-critter telepathically messing with your head and trying to eat you... I'd say, use whatever you think will work.

The discovery of tropical kelp forests is fairly recent; people thought they had to grow in cold water. Only a few years ago did someone theorize they could grow in deeper warm water, and start looking. And found them, off the Galapagos and other places. Search on ScienceDaily for kelp, you'll find it.

Chapter 79

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Byakko ships in the harbor. Two *Water Tribe* ships in the harbor.

If I go back to bed now, can I pretend this never happened?

Leaning on the windowsill of the Fire Nation-style small house, Zuko eyed the heavy steel storm shutters on either side of the window, and the Water Tribe camp on the beach hundreds of feet below. *Oh yes. This is going to end so well.*

Behind him he heard the door open, and a startled intake of breath. "You're up."

He knew that voice. He took a deep breath, glad there were only twinges of pain, and gripped the ledge harder. If he turned around... he wasn't sure what he'd do. "Lady Karasu. I am grateful for your hospitality." *Don't look.* "How tense is the situation with the Southern Water Tribe and their allies?"

Near-soundless steps, coming closer. "What makes you think it's tense?"

He gestured at the green gardens and trees around Karasu's village, all clinging to slopes over five hundred feet above the water, and at least a hundred feet above where the steep earth turned to a grassy, stony slope down to the beach. None of the Water Tribe tents were even fifty feet above high tide, and as for the earthbenders' sandstone shelters... well. "Because none of them are above the tsunami line."

"So they are." It was a wry, resigned chuckle. "We've tried to politely suggest they find someplace else to go. The Fire Lord may not be the most loved person in Byakko's domain, and we do have some leeway to trade with other lands. But the presence of so many... aggressive merchants... could be awkward to explain."

Awkward. Right. Avoiding a poisoned dagger in the back was awkward, too. "But you don't have the soldiers to drive them off without losses. So you can tell anyone who asks that you were waiting for the tsunami, if you had to." Zuko grimaced. "Though some of your sea-gatherers probably don't like that idea. At all."

"Like it? No. But family has to take care of family." Karasu sighed. "And Chief Hakoda's reaction to long-lost kin hasn't been all they hoped. Especially for my husband."

"Your *husband*?" He had to look. Had to.

She looks so much like Mom.

The same long, dark hair, caught back with carved shell combs. The same elegant, deliberate movements, of someone who'd trained in the blade as well as courtly grace. Her robes were far less costly, and edged with Byakko's dark blue mountain stripes, but outside of that...

His eyes were blurry. Zuko blinked furiously, determined not to break down.

"Amak's keeping the youngsters at bay," Karasu said ruefully. "Getting your brain back together after flowing lightning takes quiet. And the legends say anyone tormented by a sea serpent... being

around a lot of people too soon can hurt them. I hope you feel up to visitors shortly, though. They all want to meet their famous cousin."

"Infamous," Zuko countered, voice rough. "If you think you've got trouble with Aang's invaders here, if word gets out that *I'm* here-"

Karasu raised one brow. Tilted her head, in an all too familiar stubborn gesture. "It's a sailor's duty to pick up those shipwrecked, is it not?"

Zuko swallowed, and bowed to her. "Was the kadzhait found? The sea serpent," he amended at her startled look. "We found some very old archives near Asagitatsu." He couldn't keep himself from growling. "Though I thought kadzhait liked *cold* water."

"I have no idea if kadzhait do," Karasu said thoughtfully. "The pods who come to our harbor like to be called *rakko*. They say they're several tribes, even though they call those with different coats cousins." She leaned back a little. "The spotted ones seem to be the most trustworthy. The deep-hunters - they're larger, with dark sable fur - act more friendly, but some of them have a nasty sense of humor."

"I noticed," Zuko said wryly.

"That wasn't a deep-hunter anymore." Karasu folded her hands. "That was a sea serpent, and all the *rakko* are grateful you ended it."

Zuko almost took a step back at that one. She didn't *look* like she was lying. "I thought Water hated anyone who hurt their family. Even if they'd rejected one of their own first."

"That's what they'd prefer to do, yes," his aunt nodded. "But as my husband says, the *rakko* are children of the sea. The ocean doesn't care if you still love even one who's gone mad. The water it bends will still kill you. So they are angry, and they are sad. But all the pods know what it had done already, and what it wanted to do." A wry smile tugged at her lips. "Even Chief Hakoda agreed it had to die, after what it did to two of his men."

Zuko winced. "Are they-?"

"Dead," Karasu answered. Her hands brushed each other, as if wiping away blood. "What it left of them... didn't live long. Fortunately." Her shoulders rose, and fell. "So you see the fangs of our dilemma. How could we have driven the Water Tribe from our shores, when the sea serpent might give them worse than death, bending their very minds to madness? It would be more merciful to slaughter them in the night, even within our very walls."

Brrr. "Killing guests..."

"Would be ill fortune for us all," Karasu nodded. "But let the sea serpent have them? We couldn't call ourselves human." She drew a deep breath. "We were hunting the sea serpent with the pods' help, hoping it wouldn't come to that. And then... we found you." Slim dark brows arched up; a silent question.

Zuko nodded once. "How much do you already know?"

Karasu gave him a narrow look. "You were unconscious."

What did that have to do with anything? Of all Shidan's daughters, Karasu took after him the most in touching hearts and minds-

But there's no way I should know that.

Grandson or not, Shidan kept his daughters' secrets close. Shidan hadn't told *him*...

He told Kuzon. A lifetime ago.

"You're a healer." Zuko shrugged, still stiff. Quelling a flutter of panic; Karasu only pried into unconscious minds to save lives, and she never went deeper than she had to. If she had any hint of Kuzon's memories in his own, he'd know it by now. "You already knew about the lightning. And the sea serpent. I figured the exposure was obvious."

"I was wondering what happened before you hit the water." Karasu's eyes were shadowed. "You seem to have hit it from a very great height."

"I did." Getting angry was pointless. They needed solutions, not things burning down. "Rumors of the Avatar's death are greatly exaggerated." He glanced out at the water, looking for furred bodies in the waves. "If you've had the chance to speak on friendly terms with Chief Hakoda, then you may have heard his daughter Katara is a waterbender. Who started out self-trained, and then took only combat training from Master Pakku, in the North. She doesn't know how to keep a buffer between herself and the water. *At all*." He looked at his aunt again. "The sea serpent got to her. She tried to kill me. And by the time I got her fire-circled so she was sane again... the Avatar blasted his way in to see me apparently trying to set his girlfriend on *fire*." He waved a hand, one flick of his wrist. "Whoosh."

He'd never seen Karasu's jaw drop like that before. "How has he survived this long... wait. His *girlfriend*?" The look she shot at Hakoda's ship should have set the sails on fire. "Why is her father not sharpening his sword? He's *a hundred and twelve*!"

Caught off guard, Zuko snickered.

Ow. Still sore.

Though sore beat cracked ribs any day of the week. "Hundred and twelve-year-old *brat*, you mean. Didn't the wanted posters get through the Fire Nation... no, I guess they couldn't have. Even Aang wouldn't have enough luck to dodge the Home Guard if they knew who they were looking for." Another snicker. "Hakoda should be sharpening his sword. So he can threaten his daughter with cradle-robbing." Self-conscious, Zuko shrugged. "Up until late last fall, Aang was locked in an iceberg. Some weird Avatar thing. He's been alive a hundred and twelve years. But he's only lived through twelve of them."

Twelve. And he still won't think. He wanted to crawl right back into bed. Hadn't the world done enough already?

"He's just a kid," Zuko said wearily. "A kid who thought he'd never have to grow up until he was maybe thirty. If Fire Lord Sozin hadn't started the war, Aang would have gotten one nasty surprise when he turned sixteen."

Silence fell between them. Zuko could hear the wind over the waves, the hustle and bustle as his aunt's neighbors smoked fish and dried seaweed for market, the rattling crunch of someone shoveling salt into sacks to ship later.

They're doing well here.

None of Kuzon's family had dared hope it would work, all those decades ago. Those waterbenders who'd survived Hama's breakout wished they hadn't. Even after agents of the White Lotus had

arranged for their transport ship to be "lost at sea" where Byakko could intervene...

Oh, I really don't want to remember that.

That ostrich-mare's-nest of a mess had involved smugglers, pirates, and more than a few slit throats. Some of them innocent throats. It'd been enough to leave Kuzon with nightmares.

Yet after all that, Kuzon hadn't been sure they'd saved anyone. Yes, the Southern waterbenders were still breathing. But alive? They couldn't even work up enough fight in themselves to want revenge.

Let me take them where the sea rules, Karasu had asked. *If they have any hope to survive, it will be there.*

The sea ruled Lituya Bay. It was an excellent harbor; shallow at the mouth to give incoming ships pause, but otherwise deep and uncluttered. Freshwater ran down from the mountains, and edible seaweeds and shellfish were there for the taking. Any captain would treasure such a haven.

Until the mountains shook again.

Yet Karasu's gamble had worked. There was no ice here unless humans made it, true. But in a place where even the strongest of Fire had to plan for the will of Water... knowing the ocean held all their lives in its hands had given the survivors strength.

Some of them, Zuko thought sadly, remembering bodies washed up in sea wrack, or never found at all. Lituya Bay had gotten very, very good at tracing where currents might drag a body.

Stop thinking about it. Think about something else. Like Karasu. Who'd been silently, wistfully pining after one stubborn waterbender the last Kuzon had known, painfully aware it would never work.

Now she's married. With kids. Did not see that coming. I wonder what happened?

His aunt sighed. "Your mother wasn't there to tell you when you came of age. So I'll tell you, as I told Shila when she made her first lone hunt; as I'll tell Kasumi, Hayato, and Aumanil, when they master their blades, and their elements. Once you have the power to take a life, you are no longer a child."

Shila, Zuko repeated in his head, hoping to soon have faces to fit the names. Even if he couldn't stay, he wanted to *know* them. To see the hope Kuzon and Byakko had wrested from Sozin's despair. He needed hope. He was just... so tired. Sea serpents and Aang and the Face-Stealer, when could he just *rest*?

Shila, he told himself again, gripping onto the thought of a future with both hands. *Kasumi. Hayato. Aumanil.* Half those names would give the court nobles fits. Which was probably the point. *Cousins. I miss having cousins. I wonder if I could bring the Wens here, someday.*

"Now." Karasu folded her arms, determined as Ursa on the track of a missing lessons book. "Before Amak loses track of one of our youngsters - they're so *good* at sneaking, the rascals - would you like to tell me just how powerful Hakoda's daughter is? There was still ice in the water when we found you!"

"...Right." *This is going to be awkward.* "That... wasn't Katara..."

Water streamed from hand to webbed paw to hand, chasing fleeing sparks in a net that went through and over and under with dizzying speed. Up the stony beach, Hakoda kept his own hands busy mending a much more ordinary net, hoping it would keep his mind occupied enough not to say anything rash. Days on the same boats and then hours in the same subs with the swampbenders had been weird enough. He'd been watching Lituya Bay's children playing with the rakko for days now, and it still gave him chills. Fire and water weren't meant to mix with laughter. He'd seen what fire did, when water didn't fight back...

"If you want to shred something, there's always seaweed."

Hakoda glanced to his left, where a graying waterbender in Byakko's dark blue and red twisted water in and out of ropes of ice as he kept his own watchful eye on madcap young benders. "Katara was never like this."

"No?" Amak braided ice, adding decorative edges of frost-rime. "I suppose she wouldn't have been. Without someone to show her how to grasp the water the first time, she would have had to guess at all of it. Playing by herself would be hard." He looked down, voice quieter. "And playing alone is even harder."

"She wasn't alone," Hakoda said firmly. "Sokka never let that happen." He took a breath, anger stirring yet again. "But all these years we thought she was the last. You say no one keeps you here. Then why didn't any of you ever come *back*?"

Ice melted to water between pushing hands; then a mist of chill fog, sparkling in the sun. "Shame," Amak breathed. Sighed, and said it louder. "Shame, Chief Hakoda of the Southern Tribe. Though I have to admit, I wonder which Southern Tribe it was. Does anyone keep the old names now? Or is it just *his* village, and *their* village, and the one over there we don't like because everyone *knows* we're better than they are? The way we've always been, since our ancestors left the North. We didn't want to be ruled by the Northern Chief or the waterbenders; we didn't want to be ruled by anybody. And we weren't. Which worked just fine. Until it didn't. Until someone who actually *wanted* to do us harm came for us, and wouldn't stop coming."

"The Fire Nation never should have been allowed to get that far," Hakoda said darkly. "If the Avatar had faced the Fire Lord before he attacked the Air Temples-" He cut himself off, suddenly aghast.

Amak raised surprised brows, and nodded slowly. "You're a father too. Counted up the years, did you? The year Sozin's Comet came was twelve years after Roku's death. The Avatar would have been *twelve*."

The Avatar still is, Hakoda thought, suddenly ashamed himself. He'd been fighting the Fire Lord for years, hoping to give his children time to grow up. Every shore he'd visited, sooner or later you'd hear the same old refrain. *If the Avatar hadn't abandoned us...*

The Avatar was twelve. The same age Sokka had been, when Hakoda had left a brave young boy behind in his village, in the hopes that he'd be safe. "Damn."

"You're taking it a lot better than I did, the first time Karasu showed me their histories," Amak mused. "It took me weeks to let myself count the years and realize what had happened. Months more to calm down and work through how much Sozin must have gambled on that one day of power, and what he'd won from it. If any part of his plan had gone wrong - if anyone had been willing to face the firebenders before they attacked the Temples - the last hundred years of war wouldn't have happened. And the people I loved wouldn't be dead."

Hakoda knew that pain in Amak's voice. He'd heard it himself, after Kya had been murdered. And yet... "There had to be someone who-"

"Had to be?" Amak cast him a grim look. "Bending runs in families, Chief Hakoda. And you know we protect our own. There didn't *have* to be anyone from my village left alive. Not after they came and burned. Not after the rest of us spent years in the Fire Lord's *tender* care."

Hair prickled on the back of Hakoda's neck, hearing that old hate. He couldn't help but take a step back.

Amak glanced at him. Looked at where Hakoda's boots had been on the rocks, just moments before. And sighed. "There's your answer, Chief Hakoda. That is why I didn't come back."

"Anyone would be angry at what the Fire Nation did to us," Hakoda said bluntly. "You would have been welcome among the tribe-"

"I would have poisoned the tribe!" Amak's hands clenched, ice sheathing each finger like a massive claw. "I'd have twisted my hate into everyone near me. Including *your daughter!*"

Tide surged near them. Hakoda found himself gauging the distance to the foam, wondering how much warning he'd have.

Amak looked his way again, and shook his head. Straightened his shoulders, and looked out where one girl's sparks had just been doused by a fast stream of ice-water, leading to what looked like a general fray of water-splashing. "Even the most trained bender can slip, Chief Hakoda. And I wasn't even a warrior's age when they caught me. There's only so much pain a man can bear without lashing out at *something*. When Hama did, from within our prison walls... when she found a way out, a way that turned her into a *monster*..." He sighed, shoulders slumping. "Those of us who were still sane, wanted to die rather than become such a nightmare. Many of us *did*. We were shamed, Chief Hakoda. All of us. We were... tainted. When the ship we were put on was struck by lightning and foundered - some let the waves take them down." He laughed softly, eyes crinkling in faint humor. "I didn't. Too young to give up hope. Or just too stubborn, I guess. We were in the water, and we weren't dead yet. I... wanted to know what might happen next." A wry smile lit his face. "The next hand that reached for me, smelled like the storm. I took it." A deep breath. "Piece of advice, Chief Hakoda? Never, *ever* get my wife mad in a rainstorm. You wouldn't like what would happen next."

Which made no sense whatsoever. "Firebenders are weaker in the rain." Except for one. He still remembered Bato's face, and his words. *The rain caught fire.*

"Not Byakko firebenders." Amak sighed, watching spotted fur splash through waves. "Look at them. Young and trusting. Like your daughter would have been. Waterbenders are supposed to be blessed. But the rakko know some of their own can go insane." He shook his head. "Even then, that rogue still slaughtered pups. Like it slaughtered your men."

Hakoda flinched from that bloody memory. Manarak and Kaskae - what the sea serpent had left on shore had barely been recognizable as human. Death had been a mercy.

And after that, Hue had told them they were *lucky*.

Two dead, and he calls us lucky.

Unfortunately, Hakoda had to agree with the pantless swampbender. They had been lucky. The swampbenders had recognized stalking evil when they felt it tug their bending toward the ocean,

and had stampeded for the oil lamps. They'd waved flames in circles around themselves and every man tugged toward the sea, smudging them with greasy smoke to break the monster's call.

Hakoda hadn't needed fire to keep him out of the waves. But he'd felt that lonely, angry call. If Katara ever felt that - his lonely, motherless daughter...

He didn't know what she might have done. He didn't know what *he* would have done.

I don't think I'm going anywhere without lamp oil again.

"Murderous as any twisted human," Amak mused. "I wonder if it was one of us, once."

Hakoda almost dropped the net. He couldn't have heard what he thought he'd just heard. "What?"

"The sea-born." Amak gave him a quizzical look. "You know the old story."

"Sea-born?" Hakoda said uneasily. The Avatar had been an old story, once. "I don't remember Kanna ever mentioning them. Whoever they are."

"Kanna. Your mother?" Amak's brows climbed. "That's right, Bato said she was from the North. Where they spend all their time with politics instead of winter lamps and stories, so they write everything down." He let out a slow, thoughtful breath. "The problem with that is, if no one *reads* it, people forget the story is there." He glanced at Hakoda, and waved at the ocean westward. "And if the only place you have the story is in a book, and someone takes the books away... much of the Fire Nation doesn't even know there was a time they didn't *want* to conquer the world." He *hmp*ed. "Well, that's not happening here. We've started proper story-tellings every winter, and every child born here is going to *hear* about the spirits. And what other lands and people are really like." He glanced into the distance, face drawn. "As long as we can. Our island's trade is valuable enough that people can ignore some oddness... but it only takes one to betray a whole world."

Hakoda put fragments of whispers together, and tried not to look at the waterbender too darkly. "Is that what they told you? That one of our tribe - one of our *own people* - betrayed you to the Fire Nation?"

"Your daughter was the first waterbender born in the South in over a decade," Amak said levelly. "How did they know to come looking?"

How indeed? part of Hakoda wondered. But that way lay madness. He had to trust his tribe. "You're right. You should be ashamed. That you could believe any of us would turn over a *waterbender* to Ozai's army-!"

"I told you we were tainted," Amak admitted, blue eyes dark and sad. "Though - perhaps *broken* is a better word. We were kept in heat and dry and metal, away from water for years-"

"I'm not a bender, I don't understand," Hakoda cut him off, impatient. "I've heard that before. I don't believe it. Hue's just as human as everyone else. Insane when it comes to seaweed, but human."

"We are human," Amak agreed. "But I doubt you do understand. Being held away from your own element, what you were born to bend... it ravages the spirit." He glanced at the Water Tribe chief. "It's as if someone shattered both your legs below the knees, and said, *get up and walk*."

"You're walking around just fine," Hakoda said dryly.

Amak drew in breath for angry words, judging by the red flush in his face... then sighed, letting his

shoulders fall. "You don't understand." He looked away. "In a way, that's worse than the prison. Those of us who survived, knew you wouldn't understand. And... blood of our enemies or not, those who rescued us live with benders. They knew how badly we were wounded. They wanted to help."

"Help," Hakoda said, skeptical as if Amak were reading him fortunes in the clouds. "You *married* a *firebender*."

"That came later," Amak said quietly. "After her grandfather was murdered by Fire Lord Azulon."

Hakoda started. "He killed one of his own lords? Not the brightest move he could have made..." He trailed off, looking at the children playing on the shore. Glancing up the slope to where a bunch of swampbenders had gathered, kibitzing as Hue traded deep thoughts on sea-greens with some of the local seaweed-harvesters.

Hue said we'd be safe here, Fire Nation or not. Because Byakko has traded with the Great Swamp for over a hundred years... and they don't turn on people who trust them.

At least, not without warning them first...

"Byakko doesn't want to fight this war," Hakoda thought out loud. "Why?"

"Because it's wrong. Because they love to fight, but hate to kill. Because most of Byakko's people live on Mount Shirotona, which is a deathtrap waiting to go off if they lose too many firebenders. Take your pick." Amak scooped a thin thread of water out of thin air, braiding it between his fingers. "But most of all? Because Lord Kuzon was an airbender's friend. And *that* child, he couldn't save." He whistled softly. "You have no idea what a firebender will do to regain their honor."

"I might," Hakoda said dryly. "I've met Zuko." Which was another worry. "Why is he still alive?"

Amak snorted. "He's stubborn. And we got to him before the damn sea serpent's body drew in the scavengers. A little bruising on his lungs isn't going to kill that youngster."

"He's Azulon's *grandson*," Hakoda cut him off. "Doesn't your wife have a blood feud with him?"

Amak was looking at him as if Hakoda had suggested jumping head-first into a leopard-shark's jaws. "Vendetta is legal and specific, Chief Hakoda. You can't carry out a vendetta against the Fire Lord. There's no higher authority to appeal to. And if you did, you'd go for the *murderer*. Not his offspring. Besides which-

"He's an exile," Hakoda said shortly. "No one's going to care. Your wife may even think she's doing her domain a favor, if she's a bender who knows spirits. That boy attracts the worst luck I've ever seen. *Drowned* come calling, by Tui and La. If anyone else figures that out, they might think it was worth turning him in to the Fire Lord just to save your hides... What on earth is so funny?"

Amak was biting his lip, as if he were trying very hard not to laugh. "How many Kuzons of Byakko do you think there are, Chief Hakoda?"

"I have no idea," Hakoda said honestly. "What does your wife's grandfather have to do with what happens to an exile?"

"Kuzon of Byakko married Ran the Bright-Bladed," Amak said, in the familiar sing-song of a Water Tribe lineage. "Of Ran he had one daughter, Kotone, Lady of Byakko."

Hakoda choked. Kuzon. Kotone. He wasn't that familiar with Fire Nation names, but the odds of those two names showing up together, again, in the same domain...

"Kotone of Byakko married Shidan the swordsman, whose home none know," Amak went on with relish. "Of Kotone he had three daughters. The eldest Chihisen, who won her own blades in the Home Guard, married Tsubasa the Archer, and bore Haruko Byakko's heir-to-be, just this past spring. The youngest Karasu, who married Amak of the Southern Water Tribes, and bore Shila and Hayato of fire, and Kasumi and Aumanil of water-

Hakoda sucked in a breath, and possibly a bug. There was *something* caught in his throat, at any rate. *Flame. She... they named their first daughter Flame? A Water Tribe name?*

"Yet the name known to most of the blood of Fire is that of their middle daughter, Ursa," Amak went on.

Not a coincidence. Oh. Damn. "Zuko," Hakoda said numbly. "Son of Ursa... and Fire Lord Ozai."

"You really think my wife's going to turn on her own nephew?" Amak said wryly. "Or that anyone here would be stupid enough to risk her wrath by trying?" He laughed once, eyes dancing with sardonic amusement. "I don't think so."

Spots.

Zuko blinked. Scrubbed at his eyes, and blinked again. Still spots. Green and blue-dappling and *pink*, of all things. Bright spotted and speckle-dashed fur surfing through the waves in all the shades of live coral, and then some. "Ack."

Karasu chuckled. "They are a bit more colorful than the deep-hunters."

"No wonder everybody thought they were extinct," Zuko managed. "Who'd believe something like that was real?"

One dark brow arched. "You know that's what some nations say of dragons."

"Show me a dragon that ever looked that... that..." Zuko shook his head, trying to pick just the right word for the sort of otter-crocodile creatures bouncing in and out of the surf with his dripping wet cousins, chasing sparks with bent streams of water or turning other streams in the web to currents of ice or fog.

"Brilliant? Agile? Enthusiastic?" Amusement glinted in gold eyes.

"Silly," Zuko said firmly. He looked beyond the water-and-fire game, where Hakoda and the waterbender who was another uncle seemed to be discussing something. Probably him.

"Oof." Karasu clucked her tongue. "You are definitely Ursa's son. She was always so *serious*." His aunt paused. "That, or you were raised by raven-wolves."

Why do people always say that? "Worse," Zuko said wryly, watching the kids catch sight of him. This was going to be a disaster, he just knew it. "Uncle Iroh and a bunch of komodo-rhinos. And a few marines."

"I should have guessed." Karasu sighed. "Do you think it was all that time at sea that let the Moon snare you?"

"No, I blame that one on Uncle," Zuko said dryly. "He helped the Moon survive at the North Pole. She just *returned the favor*. Take out the Fire Lord's heir in the process - that was just a *bonus*." He growled.

"Did you want to follow your father that badly?" Karasu asked quietly.

"I *didn't* want Azula to follow him." Zuko shook his head, pained at the memory of flames, and his sister's vicious smile. "With Mom gone - there wasn't anyone looking out for us. We were just paid off tiles for whichever courtiers thought we might be *useful*." He lowered his voice, trying not to sound bitter. "Even Uncle. Even now. I have to do something about that, when I get back."

"Consider that carefully. General Iroh's a wily old foxdeer." Karasu beckoned to the youngsters, both two and four-legged. "And calm down. They are *not* going to eat you."

"No, their moms will just nibble on me a bit," Zuko muttered under his breath. "I'm not good with people, Aunt. Really, really not good. Worse than *Grandfather* not good."

She stared at him. Both brows climbed.

"Trust me. It *is* possible." All those young eyes, coming this way. Disaster. Absolutely. "I grew up with Azula trying to kill me. I'm... not good with kids. Or adults. Or anybody." He glanced at Hakoda's closed face, still out of earshot. "And he may not have figured out about the tsunami hazard, but he knows you're up to something."

"Oh? Why do you say that?"

"He's been fighting the Fire Nation for two years," Zuko shrugged. "We're *always* up to something."

He wasn't swarmed, at least. Most of the other village youngsters hung back, and his cousins kept a responsible distance from a relative not yet properly introduced. Though the younger rakko eeled in and out of the surf closer to him, snuffling with those odd nostrils near the tops of their heads.

"Shila, Kasumi, Yakone..." Karasu reeled off a tumble of names; Zuko winced, desperately trying to commit them all to memory. "Zuko, son of Ursa and Fire Lord Ozai, lord of Dragons' Wings, visiting us as kin."

He accepted their bows, and bowed back, consciously shaping the Flame with his hands. Watching, out of the corner of his eye, as Hakoda looked over them all and shook his head.

Yes. We don't like to squash up against each other like you do when relatives show up, Zuko groused silently. *If you threw sparks when you got stressed, you'd want space too.* "I am glad to see Lituya Bay prosper," he stated. "I will endeavor not to impose hazards on this domain that can be avoided."

The kids blinked at him. Looked at the lady of their island, and at Shila.

Good thing she likes braids, Zuko thought, banishing the whisper of unease behind a polite, neutral expression. The young lady's skin was a little darker than Azula's, her hair a lighter brown, and her gold eyes had a softer version of that slant he'd last seen in Katara's face. But there was no mistaking the family resemblance. "Mother," Shila said wryly, "is he serious?"

"He grew up in court," Karasu stated. "Nephew. You're among kin."

"And I thank you for that kindness, Aunt," Zuko said plainly, heart hurting. "But every minute an

exile lingers in your domain, you're in more danger. I have to get moving." He glanced at Hakoda, and the Water Tribe ships. And wondered, just for a moment, what Karasu would have had planned for the earthbenders among the invasion survivors if the Water Tribe chief hadn't been able to keep them peaceful. Shake the earth enough - even a small tsunami was devastating.

Better if I never ask. "I have information that should make it in Chief Hakoda's best interest to withdraw from your isle and waters," Zuko said formally. "Lady Karasu. It might be better for Lituya Bay and Byakko if you don't have too many details."

Her gaze was shadowed. "I see."

"Thank you." He bowed again. "If you'll excuse me."

It hurt to walk away. Like fire. Like a stone knife to the gut.

Keep walking.

Hakoda was waiting up the slope with Amak, a look of stunned disbelief on his face. "You can't turn your back on your own family-"

"My family, who I never knew," Zuko said harshly. "I've never been here. I didn't have their names. I didn't even have a portrait. Do you want to know why? Because I am Ozai's son. And my mother knew I loved him. So she told me nothing about my family. What you don't know, you can't ever betray." He glanced between the two Water tribesmen, for one blinding moment hating them both. "They're my family, and they want to trust me. And I can't let them. I am an *exile*. The Fire Lord's forces might kill me when they catch me, or they might try to bring me back alive for a public execution. They *will* kill anyone who's harbored me." *Anyone who cares about me.* "They're *children*. Karasu's loyalty ought to shield them from any tie to me. But the Fire Lord might say that doesn't matter."

A fist of fire, coming down...

He shoved that memory back into the darkness. He'd had plenty of practice.

Hakoda winced.

Amak's breath whistled between his teeth. "You need more time healing. An attack like that creature's is meant to strike at the bonds of family. You should go back to bed-"

"There isn't time." His nails were biting into his palms. Zuko loosened his fingers before they drew blood. "I was the Avatar's guest. Under his roof, providing him aid at his own request, at risk to my own life. He knew that. But while I was helping him - while I was saving his waterbender's precious neck - he attacked me." Zuko bared his teeth. "I'd say with intent to kill, but I know Aang. He didn't think about killing me. He didn't *think* at all. He just blasted me over a cliff and let everything... fall."

"He just..." Hakoda was shaking his head slowly, as if he didn't believe his own ears. "He put you in the water, and that monster found you?"

"Found me?" Zuko smirked. "Oh, I wish. It didn't have to *find* me, Hakoda. Aang dropped me right on top of it."

"He-" Words seemed to fail the chief.

"Of course, he didn't know it was there," Zuko said caustically. "He would have, if he'd given me

one minute to explain... but, you know Aang. Why ask questions when he *knows* who the good guys are?" He shrugged. "But for once - who knows how - I got *lucky*. Most of the rocks Aang blew down with me, missed me. One *didn't* miss the sea serpent. Must have stunned it, at least for a few minutes." He let a puff of steam escape, taking a bit of that acid fury with it. "And after that, was a *very* long night."

"You were..." Slowly, the chief shook his head. "My own men couldn't fight that thing."

"They didn't know what they were fighting," Zuko spread his hands, palm up and empty. "I did. I've fought water-spirits before. This wasn't a spirit, but - same principles. When it tried to grab waterbenders... I knew *how* to fight it." He shuddered, remembering that red haze in his brain as his body had clamored for air. "It was still close. Think I was safer in the water with it, than outside where Katara could... never mind."

Amak shot him a sharp look at that. Mouthed something, too soft for most to hear.

"Hama?" Zuko frowned. Trying not to let his sinking heart show in his face. Now there was a name he'd hoped he'd never have to hear again. She'd been nasty enough when Kuzon had visited the South Pole. After Azulon's prison had twisted her - the survivors had never, *ever* said what she did to escape, and Kuzon had known better than to ask. "Who's Hama?"

"Someone from my village. A long time ago." The chief tensed, glancing out at the waves. "What happened to Katara?"

Damn. "It's over now," Zuko tried to wave it off. "I think she knows better than to do that again. But she really needs to talk to some healing benders. Someone who knows what water can do when it's not being friendly-"

Hakoda took a deliberate step forward. "What happened?"

You do not threaten me. Not here. Not ever. Zuko raised his brow, and jerked his head toward the bay. "What do you *think* happened? She's angry, and she hates me, and the moon was up. It got right in and..." *Stop. Yes, she nearly smothered you. But this is not helping.* "I'm... sorry. She should be all right. She managed to figure out something was twisting her bending. She was fighting it. She *tried*." Breathe. Breathing was good. "I circled her with fire to break her chi's link to the ocean. She was getting her head back together. But that's when Aang came in, and-" He sighed. "If you saw a waterbender in a fire-circle, what would you think?"

"I know what I would have thought a week ago," Hakoda admitted. "And I would have been wrong."

Huh?

"Hue says there are spirits in the swamps that can't handle getting cold," the chief went on. "One called a foxfire can make people lose their minds and wander into deep water." He grimaced. "And then it eats them."

"Hinotama," Zuko nodded. "They show up in some Fire Nation swamps. If they could stand hot spices we'd be in real trouble." He snickered. "One good shake of festival fire-flakes, and they flit right back to the bogs."

Hakoda looked at him askance. "You were adrift in the ocean with a monster, and that's what you call trouble?"

"After the Siege of the North, Uncle and I were drifting for three weeks," Zuko said, matter-of-fact.

"This time I didn't even have to chase off the sea vultures." He waved it off. "Your son and daughter were okay the last time I saw them. But if they go where I think they will, that won't last. They need help. They need *your* help." He nodded toward the ships. "And you need them. You can't get out of the Fire Nation with just a pair of ships. Not without risking all of your allies winding up as ash-smears on the blockade. With the Avatar... it's still a risk. But your odds get a lot better."

"Honorable opponents," the chief murmured. "You have something I want; where my children are, and where they're going. And we have something you want: ourselves, out of here, so your family's out of danger." He nodded. "I take it this is where you propose a truce."

"No." Zuko swallowed, suddenly lightheaded. "A truce implies that when it's over, we're on different sides."

Hakoda's eyes narrowed, thoughtful.

Amak crossed his arms, scowling. "Young man, you know that Byakko can't-"

"*Byakko* can't," Zuko cut him off. "I'm not Byakko. I'm Dragons' Wings, and I *can*." His voice dropped. "I'm the only one who can."

Steeling himself, he matched Hakoda gaze for gaze. "The Fire Lord has to be stopped. I can't face him; he'd challenge me, and I'd lose. He's a master firebender, one of the most powerful benders *ever*. And I'm... not." Facts. He had to stick to facts, and ignore that memory of agony.

It wasn't easy. In a way, the Agni Kai had hurt worse than dying. Death *ended*.

"I can't face him," Zuko repeated. "But sooner or later, he'll try to destroy my people. I need your help, Chief Hakoda. Just as much as you need mine."

Hakoda weighed his offer, and sighed. "Aang almost killed you."

"He did," Zuko said flatly. "I won't forget that. But if the Fire Lord isn't stopped, he'll carry out the Face-Stealer's plan. And then all the careless Avatars in the world *won't matter*."

"Except carelessness always does," Amak said gravely. "Carelessness in breaking a spirit-sworn word, most of all. The Avatar is a powerful spirit, but he's not immune to the spirit world's laws. If you were here under his protection, and he broke that word... he's at great risk."

Zuko shot his unexpected uncle a wry look. "They're going to Boiling Rock. I don't think they'll hit a sea serpent there."

"Boiling Rock?" Amak frowned.

"Island inside a caldera lake," Zuko filled in. "A kadhait wouldn't last two minutes before it was boiled alive."

The waterbender grimaced. "That's what I thought it was." He cleared his throat. "No. They definitely won't encounter the rakko there."

Zuko gave him a narrow look. "So what are you worried about?"

"...Something worse."

Chapter End Notes

There are a few dozen species of dolphin. Some with surprisingly limited distributions. So whether or not the species of arctic-loving kadzhait Avatar Kesuk was familiar with survives in the present of Embers, there are other walking whales. And yes, spotted - and even *pink* - dolphins exist. Really.

Lituya Bay is a real place on the coast of Alaska, with an interesting geological history. (See Wikipedia.) I've actually toned it down a bit for Embers.

Chapter 80

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"I can't believe it." Keeping her voice low, Katara sorted through another book of neatly inked entries. "They keep *records* of the names of criminals? Where anybody can see them?"

"Anybody has to have a key," Sokka said under his breath, checking for locked drawers in the warden's desk by lantern-light. Going over the plan in his head again, one more time. Take Appa to Boiling Rock under the cover of night, check. Have him hide near the shore away from the small port, check. Sneak over the caldera wall in a shroud of wind and mist, freeze a path across the otherwise boiling lake, ignore all the eerie, almost *alive* whistlings and wailings of boiling water under ice, and get through supposedly impenetrable steel walls, check. Now if they could just scoop up Shiyu and get out before dawn... "Or a Toph. How many holes did she have to punch in walls for us to get in here?" *Aha*.

"There are a lot of people here," Aang said quietly, going through his own stack. "No one knows *everyone*. They have to write it down."

"There are too many people here," Katara said firmly. "Anywhere you get so many people together you don't know everyone... well, just look at Ba Sing Se."

"And anywhere everybody knows *everybody* means you never get a chance to start over." Aang flipped through pages, frowning at notes in High Court script. "You never get a chance to move beyond your mistakes."

And there was Serious Aang again, Sokka thought. And hid a wince. On the one hand, this would be a really bad place to be playing catch with a butterfly. On the other - he hated seeing Aang like this.

Though he hated seeing Toph like this more; leaning casually against her hole in the wall, but radiating enough prickly to make a boarqupine look friendly. She hadn't punched anyone for days. Instead she spent her time with Boots - when the spooked hide-behinder got up enough nerve to make a sound - and answered questions when people asked them. Outside of that... she'd made it wincingly clear she was only sticking around until they were out of the Fire Nation and Ozai was done for.

The deal was, I help you beat the Fire Lord, Toph had said just this morning. When he's done, I'm done.

Scary. Toph was their rock. Pun definitely intended. But even rock could crack.

"But if they have to keep track of... people you don't name... it's on paper." Katara frowned. "Any firebender could... well, fwoosh."

"And that's how they disappear people, sometimes," Sokka agreed, struggling with the lock before throwing up his hands and snapping the drawer open. They were stealing a *Fire Sage*; he kind of doubted the warden would miss that. "Still, Temul says that most of the time, you don't go around forgetting where you've got a firebender stashed. Can be hazardous to your health-"

"Temul *says*?" Aang frowned at him.

Heep. "Um, long story..."

"I found Suki!" Katara waved a sheaf of papers. "She's here!"

It was like Boomerang sailing out of the sun. "Suki's here?" Sokka blurted out. "But- why- how?"

"The Kyoshi Warriors in Ba Sing Se." Aang was pale. "Azula must have..."

"Duh." Toph bent and unbent a piece of iron wall between her fingers. "Snoozles. Breathe. She got here alive, right?"

Sokka gasped for air he hadn't realized he was missing. "But this is crazy blue fire, if *she* got Suki-"

"She's alive," Katara said firmly. "I've got her cell number right here. We'll just break her out, too." She turned pages, lips pressing into a frustrated line. "But I can't find Shiyu anywhere."

Sokka blew out a breath, and flipped through the ledger from the warden's desk. No... no... aha. "He's not listed with the regular prisoners. He's in... looks like they call them the Icicles. Little solitary cells, away from the sun, but up away from the lava." Sokka blinked, remembering what he'd seen an angry Avatar do with lava. Yikes.

...And what did it say about him, that he's rather think about Roku and lava than his kind-of-sort-of-not-exactly-girlfriend? He'd seen what Azula was willing to do to her own brother. And that was somebody she maybe cared about, between times trying to kill him. What she might have done to Suki, someone she didn't even know...

"She finds what you love, and she takes it away."

Sokka tried not to shudder. The look on Zuko's face when he'd said that... maybe Azula not knowing Suki was a *good* thing. "Okay. Where do we need to go to get Suki, and is there anyone else we should break out while we're here?"

"Why not break everybody out?" Aang gave him a serious look. "Nobody should have to stay in a place like this."

Urk. That was such a bad idea, he didn't know where to start. "Aang, a lot of these people are criminals-"

"Exactly." Aang looked even more serious. "We need to beat the Fire Lord. We can't do that if he hides behind his army the way he did at the eclipse. So we have to keep his army busy." He waved a hand toward the corridor and cells outside. "This is a lot of keeping them busy right here."

"Use your enemy's strength against them." Katara brightened. "Like waterbending. It could work."

"Except these guys are on an island in the middle of a boiling lake," Sokka pointed out. "The only mess they're going to make in the Fire Nation is right here."

"So I earthbend them a way out." Gray eyes were determined. "If we want people to keep fighting, we have to prove we're not beaten. We have to do something."

Yeah, but do we have to do this? Sokka glanced at Toph. Who was still leaning in the hole, face blank and bored.

Her toes were twitching, though. Which hinted she didn't like this, either.

But she's not going to say anything. Not unless one of us asks her, flat out

Blank, mute, and stubborn about it. Like a miniature mountain, complete with stormy rumbles around the top of it. Which was really, *really* annoying. Just when Aang was starting to get his head together and act like a young warrior instead of a kid, Toph was pouting like a bratty five-year-old. It was driving him up the *wall*.

Sure, she'd probably lost Zuko. The jerk hadn't shown up dripping and mad the next morning; given Prince Ponytail's past record of dragging himself out of rubble just to snarl at them, that meant he probably *was* dead. But everybody fighting had lost somebody. She needed to get her head straight and *work* with them.

Right now, though, he'd just act like he hadn't seen the toes. She wanted something, she could start talking. "We'll think about it after we get out," Sokka said firmly.

"After?" Aang rocked back on his heels.

"A lot of these guys are Fire Nation criminals," Sokka pointed out. "*Criminals*, Aang-"

Somebody pounded on the door.

Aang's eyes went wide. Katara put a finger to her lips. Toph huddled in her hole, utterly silent.

Sokka blinked. And tried to figure out why someone knocking made his heart want to hammer its way right out of his chest. The warden's office had been left locked; nobody else should be in here, and if it was the warden out there they should be listening to a key scrape the lock, right?

Wait a minute. You wouldn't knock unless you thought someone was in here... and the warden wouldn't knock at all, so - who's out there?

An oddly familiar scent tickled his nose. Just a trace, he couldn't place it-

Blasting jelly?

The door exploded.

When she got out of here, Suki thought, putting a pinch-happy guard down hard, she didn't know if she was going to kiss Sokka senseless, or kick his butt. Though right now "kick" had a distinct edge. A riot? What was he *thinking*?

"An efficient use of momentum, young Warrior." The raggedy gray-haired elder Toph had broken out of a cold cell slid inside a chi-blocker's range, and delivered two swift kicks that made even Suki wince.

Curled around his agony, that one barely noticed her iron-bar love tap to put him out.

Meanwhile her might-be boyfriend and his bunch of benders were making a hole in the growing riot. Literally. Toph stomped open a tunnel that unleashed a rush of steamy air, making even the shielded night-lanterns flicker, and jumped in without even a mad cackle.

Who rained on her parade... ooo.

Someday later, she'd tell Sokka how amazingly cool he looked chopping through spears and poking even lightning-fast chi-blockers into being somewhere else. Someday. Not yet. Wouldn't want him to get a swelled head when they still weren't out of-

The edge of Toph's tunnel was slick as glass.

If I get out of this alive, Suki thought, heart in her throat as she whipped down into darkness, *we're going to talk about stairs- yipe!*

She sailed out into dark, steam-hot air, expecting the next moment to be a boiling, lethal splash-

Sand. Hot sand. Kind of gritty and sharp-edged, no matter how much moonlight softened the look of it. But way, way better to fall into than the steaming lake a few feet away.

Toph yanked her into a stumble sideways. "Gangway, more coming through!"

Thump, and a gray old firebender blinked through even grayer sand. "Almost like riding a lava tube..."

Thump, splash.

Suki helped Katara scramble clear, raising a brow as the waterbender scooped her water back out of the sand with barely a wiggle of her fingers. "Nice."

"Nice?" Katara gave her a quick smile, then yelled up the tube. "Sokka, Aang, if you're not right down here, I'm letting Toph cook dinner!"

"Hey!" Toph's hands made sandy fists. "I don't cook!"

"Exactly!" Katara listened, and grinned. "Here they-"

Whoosh.

Katara's smile twisted into a horrified grimace, as she shot out her arms, drew back and swirled her hands-

Steaming water crackled into ice, reaching up to catch their last pair of troublemakers in a frozen embrace even as water boiling up from the lake shattered it from the base upward.

Katara's pushing fingers caught them in a swirl of water, hovering above the roasting steam. She yanked it back to the shore, dropping the pair on gray sand. "What happened?"

"There were - um - a lot of them." Aang sat up and dusted himself off with a flutter of wind. "So I blasted them back a little. But..."

A leather-wrapped hand waved from the sand. "Every action has an equal and opposite reaction." Sokka pried himself off the beach. "That's why balloons are so tricky to fight from. Everything you push, pushes you back - and could somebody close up the hole before anyone else follows us?"

Toph stomped her foot, and twisted it. The stone tube grated shut like nails on the world's biggest writing slate.

Nerves jangling, Suki really hoped she didn't hear screaming.

Though right now, it was a little hard to hear anything, with the burble and *bloop* of boiling water way too close. Just breathing took concentration. Suki had thought it was hot enough inside the prison. Down here by the water she was beginning to feel like chicken-pig soup - with her as the chicken-pig. "Hey." She breathed shallowly; even her throat didn't want to be here. "It's great to see you. It's really great to be out of that cell. But how do we get out of here, and why are we bringing a firebender with us? No offense, at least some of you guys are okay, but..."

Aang swallowed, and stood to bow to the old guy. "Fire Sage Shiyu. We need your help." He looked down. "I need a firebending teacher."

"Do you?" Gray hair long and scraggly, if still tied back with simple dignity, Shiyu looked him over curiously. "As avidly as the young prince was pursuing you, I had expected General Iroh to be your firebending master by now."

Suki'd heard of people turning pale before, but this took the apple-cake. Aang blanched, color fleeing his face like it had a torch-bearing mob after it.

Scary thing was, Katara and Sokka were almost as gray. "Oh," Sokka croaked. "Iroh."

Toph snickered; harsh and somehow, half a breath from tears. "Yeah. *Uncle Iroh. Dragon of the West Iroh. Sozin's grandson Iroh. Fire Lord Ozai's big brother Iroh.*" Her laugh would have done a sea vulture proud. "Good luck, Twinkletoes. After this war's over? You're gonna need it."

Suki's eyebrows shot up. Granted, she hadn't know Toph that long, but the girl seemed nice, under all the Earth Rumble bluster. What in the world could have happened to make her want Aang to hurt?

Shiyu glanced at the Water Tribe pair, taking in how Sokka faced him, while Katara shifted on her feet. Turned his gaze back to Aang, worry creasing his face. "Avatar Aang. What happened?"

Aang gulped. "It was- I didn't mean to, but-"

Katara grabbed for him. "*Get down!*"

The world went slow as Suki flipped backward away from a shooting spear of something lava-red. With *teeth*. From the corner of her eye she saw Sokka start to drag Shiyu back; Katara still tackling Aang to the ground as more steam-hot flesh sailed over them. Toph vanished behind triangle-plates of sandstone, backing away from the menace she couldn't see.

Upside-down in midair, Suki looked into four eyes the size of flaming boulders.

What the hell is that?

It's strong.

Katara stood in the quick spiral Toph had yanked up in the sand, slashing discs of ice at endless flailing limbs. Her ice melted almost as soon as it touched the dark rainbow-of-reds carapace, water flowing back to the quick grab of her hands. Whatever it was, was hot. So hot, Shiyu was doing an odd form of waving hands; she'd almost snapped at him to stop dancing and throw fireballs, until she'd realized the air was cooler around them.

Not cold. She wasn't sure she'd ever be cold again. But furnace air swirled, and turned just cool enough to keep breathing. And to keep from melting her discs as soon as they left her hands.

Ice hit it. I've hurt it.

She knew she had. It'd stopped trying to grab Suki and shot those monster jaws after her.

"It's a spirit!" Aang was on his toes, caught between dashing to her side and staying with Shiyu. Who was praying to Agni as he moved. Very loudly.

"More Avatar stuff?" Sokka slashed at one swath of swimming-centipede-limbs, ducking under a

jaw-shooting counter-slash.

"I guess? That water's boiling, it can't be a living centipede... archer-jaw... whatever it is!"

"You guess?" Sokka yelped.

"Hey, give him a break." Suki whipped her iron bar off the ground with her toes, caught it in time to smash at shooting jaws coming for Sokka. "He's right, isn't he?"

"Divine messenger," Shiyu was intoning, "child of the breath and the ten fingers..."

"From the way he's going, I'm guessing yes." Sokka moved with Aang, slashing at razor-edged muscle as the airbender yanked up his own stone shields to block the endless swarm of limbs.

"Hey! Less praying, more fighting!"

Of course we have to pray, Katara thought desperately. We're fighting a spirit!

But how could they appease a spirit that wouldn't talk to them? The Painted Lady had at least told strangers what she wanted, and while maybe Hei Bai had been one big roaring creature of scary, the villagers should have *known* what had happened to his shrine. It was their own fault for not paying attention. This spirit had to know they didn't belong here, but wasn't asking for *anything*.

And those are really. Big. Teeth.

Katara dodged back from the flutter of centipede-legs, slashing out at what should be vulnerable glowing blue joints-

The fleecy back rippled, like air above roasting rocks. Shiyu's cool breeze faltered.

For a moment, she almost felt like she was flying on a rope with Jet again. The same sense of lightness, the lurch in her stomach that might have been as much excitement as fear-

Sand slapped closed around her like a gritty pillow.

Oh. That hurt.

But she was breathing as the sand rushed away, not splattered against the prison foundation like a smashed egg. "Thanks, Toph," Katara coughed, as more sand slipped away to form another wall in front of them.

"So what is it, besides ugly?" Toph twisted her head from side to side, trying to catch every echo. "It feels like a really, really *big* millipede... Don't spirits go after benders first? Why'd it try to get Suki?"

"I don't- down!" Katara sheathed ice over stone and them, trying to cover Toph with her own body as those horrid jaws shot out like lightning.

Ice shattered. But the stone behind it held, just barely.

Long, fanged jaws snapped back into the snail-fleshy mouth. The dark back rippled again-

"Hey, thousand-toes!"

Aang's airball over him, Sokka slashed into a hard hide of red-black rainbow. There was a whistling shriek.

"Sokka hurt it," Katara realized, stealing quick glances to where she'd slashed the carapace with ice. "It heals from bending, and it likes fire, but Sokka's sword hurt it!" Though not much. It was so *big*.

Toph grinned at her. "And Suki's got an iron bar."

"The prison's all steel and rock!" Katara thumped a fist into her hand. "It probably couldn't get in there if it wanted to! But we didn't hurt it, why is it-"

It likes heat. It lives in boiling water. That shriek - we heard it before. I thought it was just water melting my ice-

To get into the prison... I froze part of the lake.

"...This is my fault."

"What?" Toph gripped her dress before she could get up. "No way! You're not going out there. Aang's the spirit-talk guy. You let him talk to it!"

Another airball zoomed overhead as Sokka dove in to cut at endless waves of feet. Suki hung back by Shiyu, ready to smack at shooting jaws. "He's not talking!" Katara insisted.

"Then maybe that's the right thing to do!" Toph scowled, planting her hands on the beach and shoving, breath hissing between her teeth. "Hot hot *hot* rock, darn it..."

A ridge of the lake-floor humped up, yanking the worm-centipede-thing up in the middle and sending clawed feet skidding awry. Aang gave a ringing shout, airstaff sweeping a gust of wind to blast the spirit up and back into boiling water.

Steam closed in, drifting up from settling waves.

"Um." Sokka cleared his throat; sword still raised, sweat rolling down his face. "Aang. Didn't that thing come out of the water in the first place?"

"Oh dear," Shiyu breathed.

Toph frowned. Tilted her head back, as if to look at the gondola car Katara heard overhead, probably being cranked across so the prison warden could chase after them. "Anybody else hear sizzling?"

Water rippled like molten glass.

"Look, will you just wait?" Aang called out to the waters. "We didn't mean to upset you. We can straighten this out. Just let me listen to you."

Glassy water stirred, steam spiraling above it.

"Avatar Aang!" Shiyu was studying the water with alarm. "Kanaloa are creatures of flame and the deep sea. Wildness incarnate. They aren't known for listening to anyone."

"Well, it's listening now, right?" Aang lowered his staff, sitting down. "Just tell me what's wrong, and we'll fix this..."

That's not just heat. Katara rolled away from Toph, suddenly desperate to put distance between herself and a potential innocent target. *It's angry-!*

It was like trying to stand in hurricane winds. Rage and hate and *will not be tamed, will not be caged, will kill, kill, feed!*

Katara breathed in steaming air, and deliberately let herself feel the heat of it. The volcano's heat. Outside. Not hers. *You can't have me!*

Because if it only wanted her, maybe it had a right. But her friends, her brother - they hadn't hurt it. They hadn't caged it. They hadn't frozen it.

I won't let you use me to hurt them!

Boiling water mounded up like foam, like lava. The bubble burst as the kanaloa lunged for her, hot tendrils of water striking out below the jaws, fast as an octopus-

Katara slapped her hands together in a parting arrow, water-tendrils shattering off that point of will into drifting snow.

I can do this. I can fight it! If I just remember I'm me-

Red-hot agony sluiced down her back, and she screamed.

"Aang?" Toph's jaw dropped, even as her heart leapt at that horrible scream. Why would Aang-?

No time for answers. She scooped a shield of sand over Katara, crunching a fist closed to seal stone against more boiling water. Yanked the waterbender, stone and all, into a grating skid behind her. Retreated all the way to the prison foundations, and set her stance like a mini-mountain. Because for once she wasn't sure sealed stone would hold; there was something in the water, something she must have been fighting every time she touched rock that wasn't dirt-cool, and if all it needed was *heat* to fight bending- "Sokka! Suki! What's going on?" Because she felt their frightened shivers through the sand, the two of them grouping up with Shiyu - who was *also* shaking - as Aang's footsteps on the beach turned deliberate as a stalking tide.

Sokka gulped. "...You don't want to know."

That was going to earn him a face full of dirt later, Sokka just knew it. But Toph was already taking care of the important stuff - keeping Katara *away* from the kanaloa - and he didn't want its attention on her any more than it already was. And he definitely didn't want *Aang's* attention on her.

If that was still Aang in there. At all.

Never thought I'd miss Avatar glowy-eyed scariness.

Aang's eyes were glowing now, all right. Glowing a blue as hot as Azula's fire, and twice as scary. *"You dare try to tame my home. Oathbreaker! Liar!"*

"Ash and frost," Shiyu whispered, almost gray. "What did Avatar Aang do to offend Fire?"

"Um." Sokka's sword seemed to weigh down his arms like lead. This was worse than facing Hama. This time, if his blade swung at Aang, it'd be his brain behind it.

But he didn't dare back down. If this kanaloa was a fire spirit, not just a water-thing, then he and Suki were probably the only thing between Shiyu and the same kind of take-over-your-brain heart-

screwiness that had made Katara attack Zuko.

But we weren't between the screwiness and Aang. Damn it.

"What *could* he have done?" Shiyu persisted. "All the Fire Nation is at war with the Avatar. What oath could he have broken to those who seek his death?" The sage shuddered, not taking his eyes from Aang's hands, curling like the kanaloa's claws curled through water. "The Great Spirits shield the Avatar from the most malevolent spirits of their element. Agni does not rule the deeps, but the kanaloa is born of fire as much as it is of water. What could Aang have done, to forfeit that protection?"

Sokka winced. "Would it help if I said he's sorry?"

Shiyu gave him a look of utter disbelief.

"...Right. Spirits don't believe in sorry." Sokka grimaced. "I don't do spirits! Meat, sarcasm, swords - what more can the world ask of a guy? What do we *do*?"

Suki knew swords; she knew not to get too close, so he had room to swing. But from the look in her eyes, she really, really wanted to be shoulder to shoulder with him. "He's the Avatar, right? He talks to the spirits. Maybe he's talking to this one."

"Yeah," Sokka said under his breath. "Let me tell you the kind of luck Aang's had *talking* to spirits. Asagitatsu came that close to *charbroiling* him, and Zuko was there to talk her down that time..."

Shiyu choked. "You *found* the Blue Dragon? How- no one in a *thousand years*-"

Aang raised a hand, and boiling water rose up with it. And up, and up... and finally Sokka stopped looking up, because his knees were knocking together bad enough already and there was *nothing* a sword could do to stop this.

Suki traded a glance with him, and took a deep breath. "Aang! Listen to us! We're your friends. What can we do to help?"

Aang's laugh echoed in time to the pulse of jagged jaws. "*Die...*"

"Everybody *get down!*" Toph yelled.

Something large and massive and *metal* dropped out of the sky.

Gondola, Sokka realized, mouth hanging open as the wave fell apart into harmless ripples, steam gushing up from frosted steel on top of a very squashed kanaloa.

"Yes!" He almost sagged in relief. "Toph, you rock!" Sokka waved his off hand at the twitching monster, hearing a few stray non-monstery groans. Apparently there'd been somebody *in* the metal when it came down. Ow. "Or in this case, gondola..."

"Wasn't me, Sokka!" Toph's voice sounded about as panicked as he'd ever heard her, as she grabbed up sand and dove under the rock shielding Katara. "Kind of busy!"

The kanaloa whistled like a steam kettle, flailing under the weight of steel. Aang's head jerked sideways with a snarl, blue-glowing eyes narrowed as he began to raise the airstaff. "You *dare*-"

With a banshee howl, fire and wind and one small body slammed against foundation stone.

"Aang!"

The air fluttered with fire.

Leaves. Sokka blinked at them, stunned, gaze catching bits of brown and gold and scarlet as they billowed and swirled in flames. *Leaves on fire, where the heck did they come from?*

Splorch. Squelch. Splish...

Dripping from his black hair all the way to his pointy-toed boots, crazy bits of ice dropping off folds of soaked fabric, Zuko squished his way out of steaming water up onto the shore. Stomped past the still-twitching kanaloa, and glared at one unconscious airbender. "You have *no idea* how long I've been waiting to do that."

One possessed Avatar down, Zuko thought, brushing more water off of himself; nose wrinkling at the taste of sulfur he hadn't quite been able to escape. Bleah.

Given that he'd just had to shatter frozen steel cables and dive off a falling gondola into a boiling lake because of said possessed Avatar's *blinding idiocy*, nasty water in his mouth was getting off easy.

Subtle. We planned to be subtle, Sokka. Sneak into Boiling Rock, find your guy, sneak out. I thought you could do subtle.

Zuko had tried for subtle, using the gondola roof for his surreptitious ride over. Every firebender was at a low ebb just before dawn, so that was exactly when the Warden liked to get new supplies in. Regular. Like clockwork. Really exhausting, annoying clockwork. But useful, if you could fight the pre-dawn snooze and ghost up onto a roof like a shadow. Which he had. And settled himself in to wait, meditating as the gondola rocked into motion and started pulling across-

And then the alarms had gone off, and a monster had shrieked, and he knew *exactly* where Aang had to be. Damn it.

He eyed the monster, and considered what Amak had been able to tell him about that power of fire and water. *One spirit... pinned, but not down yet. Okay. That first-*

"Um." Picking his jaw up, Sokka lowered his sword, still dazed. "Aren't you... dead?"

The strange girl in prisoners' dull red gave Sokka a weird look. Fire Sage Shiyu winced.

Zuko gave the Water Tribe warrior a smirk, and knew it was all teeth. "Not yet."

"Sparky!" Rock poured away from Toph like a mini-dust storm. "I need help! Katara's really hurt!"

"Do what you can," Zuko said grimly. *She's okay. Thank Agni.* "We've got to put the kanaloa down before Aang wakes up again. I'm not going to get another free shot."

"A kanaloa is the spirit of the wild heat of the ocean-fires," the Fire Sage warned, glancing toward Aang. "I tried to tell the young Avatar, it *cannot* be tamed-"

Zuko folded his hands in the Flame as he faced the kanaloa, and took a slow, deliberate breath. "I didn't say *anything* about taming it."

Water and Fire. If Amak's right, this thing's as strong as the islands themselves.

As strong as the Fire Nation, and just as fragile. He knew how to kill it.

We are Fire. We are the blood of dragons. The only thing that can destroy us... is each other.

Fire and water. He'd done this before, in a garden in Ba Sing Se...

His right hand drew off rippling heat with one smooth pull, as his left pushed water down.

In the midst of volcano heat, frost bloomed, crackling across a carapace dry as dead leaves. The pinned monster writhed, squealing.

"I'm not here to negotiate," Zuko said grimly. "I'm not here to *understand* you. I am here to take these people out of here *alive*. The Avatar included." Another slow pull, frost spreading in white waves. "Let us pass. Or die."

Shiyu sucked in a breath, shocked; arms rising in the first move of a block. "Young prince, this is a spirit! You cannot-"

Zuko suppressed a snarl, and flicked a glance at the sage that would have had even Captain Jee thinking twice. "I have it on very good authority I *can*." He let his good eye narrow. "And if you don't like it, take it up with the Moon. And tell my uncle to stop asking spirits for *favors*."

"You... what...?" Shiyu took a step back, dawning dread on his face.

"I get really tired of explaining," Zuko growled, focusing back on the kanaloa. "You. You're old. Probably as old as this lake. Maybe older than this island. You *know* what I am. Don't you."

Thrashing limbs hesitated. Slowed.

"I thought so." Zuko smirked. "I know what you are. I know whose *kin* you are. And I *won't* let you in." The Face-Stealer was old, so very old; but he could taste the same malice around this creature. "Ask your elder what I've done to the drowned. Ask the ocean where the sea serpent's bones lie. Ask who woke Asagitatsu! *Do you think you can face me?*"

Serrated jaws snapped. And dissolved into steaming water.

Zuko took a shaky breath, as the kanaloa melted into rivulets of dark water, and slipped away into boiling depths. "I guess that's a *no*."

"...You just bluffed a spirit-monster." Sokka's sword sank, as he blinked. "You're scary, you know that?"

"It wasn't a bluff." Zuko shook himself, and headed for Toph's little bowl on the beach. "Toph, hang on, I'm... *damn*."

Toph's breath almost hiccupped, as she tried to run sandy hands near but not on blistered skin. "It's bad, isn't it?"

"I've seen worse." *In a mirror*. "Keep her hair out of it, okay? That'll help." Zuko pulled water out of the sand with sweeping gesture; no way was he using the lake with a cranky kanaloa still out there. Besides, while not much survived in hot springs, the things that *did* survive tended to munch humans in a very bad way.

The strange girl yelped. "He just-!"

"I know. We found some crazy stuff while you were gone." Sokka went to one knee as Zuko bent water over his sister's seared flesh. "You can do this, right? Amaya... you were really learning from

her..."

"Babies, stoves, pots of boiling water," Zuko said grimly. "At least if your sister comes to, she's not going to scream without a good reason." *Careful... have to be fast, before things get too set, but careful...*

Katara moaned, coughing pink-stained water. "Aang... he's not..."

"Someone should check he's still breathing," Zuko said dryly. "I don't think I hit the wall with him that hard. But I could be wrong."

"Z-Zuko?"

"Good to see you're alive." Zuko tried to make his voice a little gentler. "I saw you trying to fight the kadzhait. I was hoping you'd made it."

"You could have told us *you* made it!" Still holding Katara's hair up, Toph made a fist at him. "I thought you were *gone*! I th-thought you were..."

"For a while there, I thought I was too. Ever try to fight a fifty-foot waterbender with *teeth*, while you're *in* the water? Very. Not. Fun." Zuko breathed in steam, and tried to *reach* for that sense of water-seared lungs. "Okay. Some of this I can fix now. Some of this we'd better let Amak handle, he's got a lot more experience healing lung-scalds-"

"Amak?"

Two pairs of blue eyes on him. Katara swallowed, deliberately not pulling away from his hands. "That's a-"

"Water Tribe name," Sokka finished, straightening. "What the - how did-?"

"Guys!" The girl waved her free hand at them, iron bar lifted. "Water Tribe reunions later! We've got problems!"

Aang coughed, and gulped back the urge to throw up as the world spun around him. Everything hurt.

"Don't move." Shiyu's voice. Felt like probably Shiyu's arms, carrying him over rough ground. "You hit the wall very hard, young Avatar. And I doubt the kanaloa was gentler before that."

"Ugh." Aang blinked at blurs of blue and green and... red? Right, Suki-

Wait. That hair was way too dark to be Suki's.

But the world jerked again - Toph's earthbending? - and he had to concentrate on keeping last night's dinner down. "What did... the kanaloa want?"

Old arms trembled. "Nothing we dared to give it-"

"Explain later!"

Wait. Wait, Aang *knew* that snarl, from the dark hair running in front of them. But it was impossible...

"The kanaloa backed down. That doesn't mean it gave up," Zuko growled. "It's fire *and* water, it

owns this lake, and in case none of you *noticed*, Toph can't bend this path back down into the water without getting her feet charbroiled, that's a prison full of *angry firebenders* back there, and whatever you did cut them loose, damn it, Sokka-!"

"Hey, I had to improvise, okay?" Sokka shot back. "The map didn't say *angry snake-bug here!*"

"Because I didn't know! Thank you so *very* much, *Fire Sage* Shiyu!" Angry gold glanced back at them. "You're supposed to keep maps of the Fire Nation. Maps with *where angry spirits are* on them. And you knew it was here. *You knew!* Why was that *not* on the map?"

"Ah. The maps... your uncle borrowed... three years ago." For the first time, Shiyu sounded less than certain. "Well, when he said they were for *your* education... and... you *had* been exiled. And we knew the terms, if you'd remained much longer in Fire Nation waters, well..."

"You would have let me get dumped here when I didn't *know* about the kanaloa?" A definite snarl. "You would have fed me to that *thing* - do you have any idea what it could have done with me? To everyone here? To *anyone* in range before someone got lucky enough to kill me?"

"We... didn't think it would do anything with *you*, Prince Zuko," Shiyu admitted, voice strained. "After all, it wasn't as if you were..." His voice died.

"Azula?" Zuko growled.

Aang winced. He wasn't even Fire Nation, and he knew Zuko was touchy about that. How had Shiyu missed it?

Zuko's alive. Wow. I need to tell him I'm sorry, so much...

How is he alive?

"Oh man, they're coming faster," Sokka panted, on one side of Katara; Suki was on the other, helping her stumble along. "Toph! Can you-"

"You want to juggle hot rocks with your feet, you try it!" Toph's voice was sharp with pain. "Zuko-"

"I'm trying, but it's a whole volcano," the firebender got out, one hand pulling on air like taffy; the heat-waves streamed away like silvery ribbons in the dark before dawn. "It's like trying to tone down Asagitatsus all by myself. Just skimming the heat off the top hurts."

He's... using Sozin's bending, Aang thought fuzzily. *Like when the Fire Lord was fighting with Roku, before...*

Oh, that was a horrible thing to remember. But this wasn't a volcano after them. Was it?

Aching all over - it felt like his *bruises* had bruises - Aang craned his head to look over Shiyu's shoulder.

...Uh-oh.

Red uniforms. And red... not-uniforms. A lot of them. Appearing out of the steam and night like glowing embers, borne on a flood of lava.

Maybe I shouldn't have opened those cells...

A wall of blue fire blazed, racing between them and the charging horde.

Heart in his throat, Aang craned his head toward the shore.

Blue light turning dark hair black, Azula smiled. "Hello, brother."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I feel I have to put this in... just as I came up with "mockingjay" without having ever read (or watched) the Hunger Games, I named Yakone without ever having seen Legend of Korra. (And I still haven't seen it.) Yakone as a character in this story had been named for over *two years* before LoK showed up. As in, before we had names of any of the characters in Korra, including Korra herself. Yakone is an Inuit or Ahtna Athabaskan name that supposedly means red aurora; I figured it'd be an excellent fit for someone with fire and water parents. The fact that someone named Yakone is an enemy waterbender in LoK is pure coincidence.

As for the monster... look up Polychaete, and especially the Pompeii worm. Heee.

Chapter 81

If Agent Bolin had loaded her down with any more protective charms, Azula thought, she would have jangled when she walked.

At the moment, she wouldn't have cared if she had. Holding a wall of fire against determined, angry firebenders wasn't as easy as it looked...

And something was *pushing* at her.

Something's down there, Bolin had told her. *In the water. I can feel it in my scars.*

Watching steam roil from the waters, Azula believed him.

Hate them, something hissed at her, *burn them*, destroy *them*-!

Oh, please. As if she didn't have to deal with that impulse every day. The vast majority of people were annoying, insignificant worms not worth your time to burn them to cinders. You'd wind up doing nothing else. And that, as Mai so eloquently put it, would be *boring*.

"And I hate being bored." Azula smirked as her brother and his ragged associates ran past her, sneering at whatever was trying to lure her into such an obvious trap. "Could you be any more childish? Hate, burn, destroy; you don't even know how to take a *subtle* revenge."

The fire-pulse of hate... hesitated.

Azula chuckled, as the little earthbender hung back long enough to scoop up the last bit of rock bridge and curl it into a shielding wall, allowing boiling water to make a moat between them and their pursuers. "Just watch."

After all, she had time to spare. Her loyal agents and onmitsu had already extracted all the truly valuable hostages from the riot. She couldn't hear them loading the airship from here, but - ah, yes. There were Mai and Ty Lee at the crest of the crater, the airbender waving a pink silk scarf in *mission accomplished*.

Azula stretched her legs in an easy jog to catch up with the others. *Time for a little fun*. "You look rather ragged around the edges, brother." She had to kill someone for that. No one got to torture her brother but her.

Zuko shot her a sideways glance. "I've had better days."

"Aww." Azula *tched*. "Did the nasty spirits bite you?"

"Brotherly-sisterly trying to kill each other later!" Sword drawn, Sokka put himself between her and the path to the beach. He waved the others on, with an extra wave for the Kyoshi Warrior when the brunette looked stubborn. "What are you doing here? How did you even find us?"

Reluctantly, the others starting heading down-slope to the beach, where surviving Water Tribe ships and one flagless ship that was *probably* Byakko's were pulling up anchors. While one very large, very furry six-legged beast lowed, eyeing her from under a shaggy fringe of hair.

Azula glanced at the bison. Then at Sokka, one brow arched. "Do you really have to ask?"

"...We get out of this, we'll paint him *blue*, I swear..."

"Try black," Zuko advised, stepping subtly between her and the aggravated Water Tribesman. "Harder to see in a bright sky - wait. *Wait.*" He gave Sokka a sober look, then turned his attention back to her. "Azula. Why are you here?"

"I'm hurt," Azula pouted, one hand almost over her heart. "I can't worry about my big brother?" She smirked. There wasn't much time for this... but there should be just enough. "How was your birthday present? Flammable, I hope?"

"With the proper application of a few unusual materials, yes." Zuko took a steady breath; not so deep as to warn of breathing fire. "Why are you *here*?"

Interesting. This wasn't the hotheaded brother who'd tried to fight her under the cherry blossoms, before Uncle had tossed her off the ship so they could escape. It wasn't even the desperate refugee who'd faced her lightning in Ba Sing Se. It was like the voice of his letter; one domain heir to another of a *different* domain, trying to arrange delicate matters to their mutual benefit.

And she'd read the reports on General Fong. Aim him at a Fire Nation settlement, and the man wasn't likely to stop himself short of total annihilation. Which implied he had *been* stopped.

As did Sokka's sudden gulp, and pallor. Hmm. Perhaps the Avatar's bunch of young idiots would finally take her family seriously?

I wouldn't count on it. "Oh, it was convenient," Azula shrugged. "So many interesting prisoners, so many hostages, that Fire Lord Ozai wasn't making full use of. Why not? After all, the Avatar's little band makes such a useful distraction." She shot a sly glance at the airbender leaning on a ragged Fire Sage, and lifted her voice to carry over the mutter of waves. "Though I have to say, I never expected him to set loose an entire prison of maniacs and murderers. How viciously practical." She shook her head, almost in pity. "Or it would be, if the Warden didn't already have plans for mass escapes. Did Zuko tell you he's Mai's uncle? He's very prepared. The day this prison stops sending its usual coded messages is the day the Home Guard assumes the worst, and takes... appropriate measures. I wonder how many will survive?"

The airbender flinched. Good. Escaping from prison was a legitimate reason for someone to be killed on sight. Hadn't he thought of that when he made his plans?

Probably not. So, how to twist the knife deeper...

"Still, practical is good. Wouldn't you say so, brother?" She dusted her hands off. "Maybe one day he'll even appreciate your handling Fong for him. That man wouldn't have let peace exist while he lived. If you hadn't killed him... the Avatar would have had to. And my, wouldn't that have been such a *splendid* way to start peace in the world? Killing one of the Earth Kingdom's most decorated generals." She snapped her fingers, as if it had just occurred to her. "But now everything's fine. Avatar Aang and his allies can blame it all on you, the evil Fire Nation prince. How convenient."

The airbender was starting to look positively green. How amusing.

I wonder if I can actually get him to pass out?

"You're sick!"

Ah, the waterbender. Looking very much the worse for wear; Azula could read the stiff movements of someone trying not to aggravate a serious back injury.

"Twisted, crazy," Katara ranted on, "you sent an army after your own *brother*-!"

"And he *won*." Azula raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "You should show a little patience. After all," she turned back to Zuko, "I'm here to do you a favor."

"In exchange for what?" Her brother was holding his ground. Steady as if a fleet full of angry Water Tribesmen and earthbenders didn't exist.

"Nothing. I... owe you one." Painful to admit, but true. "The Fire Nation is better served if Avatar Aang remains alive. A pity Father can't see that." She drew a fine scroll from her sleeve, and tossed it.

Zuko caught it, eyes never leaving her face.

"Since he hasn't been able to kill the Avatar *yet*, he's taking the next logical step," Azula said briskly. "If a Water Tribe Avatar would destroy the Fire Nation... then he'll use Sozin's Comet to make sure that never happens."

"No way. He couldn't do that without killing all the-" The little earthbender went pale.

"The Northern Water Tribe," Katara breathed. "Oh, no."

"They're coming." Hearing the faint sounds of a furnace in the air, Azula took a step back. "I doubt even you can stop this invasion, Avatar Aang. But it should be interesting to see you try."

"Azula!"

She narrowed her eyes at her brother.

"You'll always be my sister." Pale gold was steady. Almost smiling. "And you know where to find me."

...Damn volcanic mists. The sulfur made her eyes sting.

Blinking, Azula caught the ladder that fell out of the sky, and let it carry her away.

"Augh. Toph. *Air*."

Arms wrapped around one living, breathing firebender, Toph buried her tears in warm silk. "Don't you ever ever *ever* do that again!"

"I'll try." Zuko held onto her a moment longer, then carefully untangled himself, guiding her hand to the ship's rail before he let go. "I'm glad you're okay. But there are things I have to do now."

"Yeah." Toph slapped a hand against blind wood. "Like punch one idiot right in the nose!"

"...He doesn't get off that easy."

Uh-oh. That was Zuko *cold*, angry all wrapped up in thinking until he got almost as scary as Azula. "Sparky? Kind of don't like fighting when I can't see people throwing things."

"Like I said." Zuko's voice was still cold, with that little edge that reminded her that yeah, he *was* the crazy Fire Princess' older brother. "He doesn't get off that easy." He raised his voice a little, to carry across Hakoda's ship to where Amak was moving more water over Katara's still-ouchy back, and the rest of her friends were talking to Appa as he swam along with them. "Fire Sage Shiyu. If you intend to teach Avatar Aang, you should be aware that should he ever act again as he did at the Western Air Temple, he will be the focus of *personal* vendetta from my sister. And possibly

General Iroh. I suspect Lady Kotone would restrain Byakko from replying as my grandfather Shidan would wish, but I wouldn't count on it. As for the people of Dragons' Wings - they're not all Fire Nation. Visiting there could get *very messy*."

Toph could almost hear the snap of teeth biting out the words. Ooo boy.

"Look," Sokka started, "I know you've had a bad few days. But we've kind of got something more important to worry about-"

"*We* have *nothing* more important to worry about."

Toph felt the heat, as Zuko's sleeve snapped through air in one noble flick of dismissal.

"There is no *we* here, Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe. Your ally's actions have insured that. Once I copy my sister's message and Amak pronounces your sister sufficiently healed, *we* no longer exist. *You* can go wherever you want. As long as it is somewhere *away* from Byakko."

There was a quiet thumping, as if someone was tapping a Water Tribe boot against the deck. "You said you would oppose Fire Lord Ozai," Hakoda said levelly.

"Read a map, Chief Hakoda," Zuko said dryly. "If the Fire Lord's heading for the Northern Water Tribe, he'll need to resupply with food and water somewhere before he crosses the arctic sea. Do you want to bet he'll skip getting some target practice in, too?" His voice went flat. "There's something much more dangerous than Fire Lord Ozai trying to get loosed on this world. And I intend to *end* that. Now."

"What I did was wrong." Aang's voice was low, as if he'd chewed over the words again and again, trying to get them just right. "I'm sorry-"

"Fire Sage Shiyu." Zuko's words marched on, as if Aang hadn't spoken. "If you take him as a student, you should be aware that Avatar Aang does not feel himself bound by other nations' laws and customs. Not the Water Tribes. Not the Earth Kingdom. Certainly not the Fire Nation. Very well, then. If he demands to be treated as an Air Monk, then I will treat him as they would for his crime." His breath was almost a snarl, as his weight shifted toward Aang's voice. "*You are shunned.*"

Hakoda rocked back on his heels, feeling tension thicken the air. *Zuko didn't say he was going to do this-*

Which, damn it, should have been a warning sign. Sokka had told him, they had to pay attention to what the Fire Nation *didn't say*. Zuko had promised an alliance against Ozai, and that he'd lead Hakoda's people to where Hakoda's children were most likely to have gone. And yet, despite the injuries Amak said Zuko had survived, the exiled prince hadn't said he meant to take revenge for Aang's thoughtless act. He hadn't said *anything* about Aang. At all.

The airbender hadn't been this pale on the Day of Black Sun.

"I do not hear you. I do not see you," Zuko went on, every word like a tolling bell. "Your words are the stifling breeze. Your presence is empty air. *I turn my face away.*"

Aang went dead white.

"But," Katara started to protest. Caught Hakoda's look, and winced.

Zuko took a slow breath, shoulders falling. "Kuzon wanted him found. He's found. The world needs him to have a firebending teacher. He's got the best one I can think of. But he *will. Not. Listen.*" He shook his head. "I can't do this anymore."

Silent, he walked away.

Aang's knees gave out.

"Aang!" Sokka caught the airstaff before it could clatter to the deck.

"What the heck did he just *do*?" Suki narrowed her eyes at the retreating firebender. "He tried to burn down Kyoshi Village, and you're letting him say things like that? What's wrong with-"

"Suki, just stop," Sokka said urgently, catching the airbender's arm. "Aang. He doesn't have the right to do that. I know what you did, but he's not a Temple Elder, he can't-"

"No." Aang swallowed hard, and cleared his throat, not even trying to stand. "He's right. He has every right to do... what he just did."

Shiyu sighed, folding his arms as if he were wearing heavy red robes, and not a prisoner's tunic. "And why do you believe Prince Zuko has the right to speak so, Avatar Aang?"

"Because..." Aang shivered, just a little. "I violated the right of hospitality."

"The... whosawhat now?" Sokka gave him a look askance.

As well he might. Hakoda had been listening those times when Aang spoke of his people. He didn't remember hearing about this.

"Ah." Shiyu nodded. "I have read some of Avatar Roku's writings of his time among the Air Nomads. But it is not the same as the understanding of one who is from among them." He drew a careful breath. "Perhaps you could tell us of it?"

"If you welcome someone to your camp, they're under your protection," Aang said quietly. "If they... do something you don't like... you're supposed to tell them to get out of camp before you do anything else. And - I didn't. I saw him, and the fire around Katara, and I... blew him away from her."

"Off of a cliff," Hakoda stated, trying to keep his voice neutral. It wasn't easy. "On top of a sea-going monster. The same monster he was trying to *protect my daughter* from."

Still circling water across Katara's shoulders, Amak was deliberately silent.

He promised he wouldn't get involved unless it came to violence, Hakoda recalled. Zuko is family, but Aang is the Avatar. Benders can't cross the will of the spirits lightly...

Which is why Zuko asked you to teach Aang about consequences. Damn.

Easy enough to say he'd been across the world when things had gone wrong. He'd *had* time to speak with the boy before the invasion. But defeating Ozai had always seemed to be more important.

And it is important. The Fire Lord wants to destroy us all. But we can fight that. How can we fight the spirit of the world?

"But I didn't *know* there was a monster-!" Aang cut himself off. "I didn't know. I should have

asked. Master Gyatso would have asked. But I was scared and there was fire around Katara like the last time she got burned, and I didn't *mean* to kill him! I just... pushed him away. Except - I didn't look where I pushed him." He took a shaky breath. "And that was wrong. I - was wrong." His voice wobbled. "He's got every right to shun me. And I don't know how to *fix* this."

I've been asking that myself. "You can't," Hakoda said plainly.

Sokka's gaze jerked toward him. "Dad-!"

"You can only do what you are doing," the Southern chieftain went on. "Take your punishment like a man, and learn from it."

"But that doesn't make sense!" Katara's glance his way was full of frustration, and more than a little guilt. "Why is he punishing Aang? The water-spirit got in through *my* hate. I'm the one who started this, Zuko *knows* how much I hate him-

Shiyu coughed, one hand politely covering it. "Young lady, that would be the point. Prince Zuko does, indeed, know that you hate him. If you attack him, it may be regretful, but it is not a betrayal. Whereas you, young Avatar..." Dark gold eyes sought gray. "You claim to hate no one. You *believe* you mean no harm to anyone. And then..." He cleared his throat, and eyed Amak. "How badly was he hurt?"

Blue eyes went dark. "He's a healer," the older waterbender said plainly, gathering up water from Katara's back; molding it into spiky ice the way another man might unsnarl fishing line when he fretted. "And he's Shidan's grandson. Which means he's tougher than any human has a right to be. Even so... he *almost* drowned. He *almost* had every rib shattered. He spent all night at sea, with *no* shelter, fighting a rogue rakko out of his head. You can ask Katara what that takes. Better yet, ask the Swampbenders. They knew enough to grab for the lamp oil the first time it started whispering to them." His gaze flicked to Aang, just for a moment. "For someone who claims not to wish him harm, you came closer to killing him than anyone else has managed. And *anyone* includes the pirates who blew up the *Wani*, Admiral Zhao, Fire Princess Azula, and numerous unpleasant spirits, the last one being an *angry kanaloa*."

Aang winced.

That was cruel, Hakoda thought, eyes narrowed at the older man. Aang knew he'd committed a crime. The airbender was punishing himself for it already. And yet-

If it'd been Katara who went over that cliff... I'd be angry, too.

And the waterbender had already admitted what anger lurked in his nightmares. Anger deep and terrible as the sea itself; so terrible, Amak had shut away all thought of going home, for fear of bringing that poison into the tribe.

Hakoda had his doubts that it could truly be that bad. Family was family. Even if Amak had no close kin left, he should have come home. But that Amak was angry - yes. Of that he had no doubt at all. And Hakoda knew from hard experience that robbed of its target, anger was a boomerang that bounced off a *lot* of skulls on its way back. Witness what had happened to their truce on the beach.

And that's why he took his water away from Katara, Hakoda realized. *He didn't want to risk catching her in the backlash. Amak knows his anger's looking for a target, he doesn't want it to be her-*

Which was exactly what Aang *hadn't* managed. Huh.

"And *that* is the problem, Avatar Aang," Shiyu said plainly. "As we say in the islands... *your actions shout so loud, I can't hear what you say.*" He spread empty hands. "Prince Zuko cannot believe you. And so no, he will *not* listen to you. Not until your actions - your *actions*, young airbender, *not* your words - prove that your hand and tongue do not make liars of each other." The Fire Sage took a long, considering breath. "In a way, I must say I am grateful. With you as a declared foe of the young lord, the rest of his domain will simply treat you as an enemy."

"And that's supposed to be good news?" Sokka almost yelped.

"An enemy, rather than a betrayer and a liar?" Shiyu said dryly. "Yes. That is very good news." He swept his gaze over Sokka's friends. "If I understand what's been said, the Avatar has claimed to be the young prince's friend-"

"He *burned down* part of my village," Suki said sourly. "He chased you across the world, his sister captured my Warriors-"

"A lot of stuff's happened since then," Sokka shrugged. "He's the one who told us where to find Shiyu. And if we hadn't found him, we wouldn't have found you. Not to mention, big scary water-fire monster?"

"Okay, maybe he's not all bad," Suki allowed. Tilted her head at Aang, blue eyes wide in disbelief. "But you want to be his friend?"

"He's not what you think," Aang said quietly. "I guess... he's not what I thought, either."

"Nor are you what he thought. And that is the problem," Shiyu said gravely. "You claimed to be a friend. And there is no creature so treacherous, so deadly to a domain of Fire, as one who claimed to be an ally."

Aang flinched.

"Wait, wait - *treacherous*?" Suki's fist rested on her hip in disbelief. "Aang? He's-" She flung up her hands. "I don't know what the exact opposite of Princess Crazy is, but he's it! And Zuko acts like she's still his family, and wants to get *the Avatar* angry at him instead? That's crazy!"

"Not if you ask a Fire guy," Sokka sighed. "Zuko knows Azula might put a knife in his back next time. He kept her out of range. Where he could see it coming."

"So they're both crazy," Katara said firmly. "Sorry, Toph."

"Nope, I'm good." The earthbender was inching her way down the rail, dark metal reaching out from one hand like black fingers to feel polished wood. "Sparky *is* crazy. He knows that. He's just not crazy like his sister."

"Anyway," Katara said awkwardly. "What do you mean, deadly to a domain? Aang hit *Zuko*."

"But an attack against the lord of a domain is never an attack against only one soul," Shiyu said gravely. "Avatar... Aang. Have you studied a spider-fly's web?"

"Monk Gyatso said it was a lesson in compassion," Aang nodded. "That we should care for every life, even one that small."

"It is more than that," Shiyu stated. "It is the fragility of life, and how it turns on things unforeseen."

Burn one strand, and the entire web goes up in flames. I do not know how much you know of firebenders, and loyalty... but for those who blood is Fire, there is always a gap in our defenses. A vulnerability in our hearts, that evil souls may prey on." Shiyu glanced across the deck, where Zuko was watching the waves. "For those who follow him, the young prince is their fortress against Fire Lord Ozai's will."

Aang blinked at him. Closed his eyes, and finally nodded. "We're all connected."

So the village elders might say, Hakoda knew. But you didn't send elders to fight a war-

"But a fortress won't help them," Aang went on, gray eyes far too old. "Just like the polar night won't help the Northern Water Tribe. Not if Ozai attacks with the Comet behind him." He took a deep breath. "If what I need to fix this is *actions* - let's start there."

"Okay." Suki sat cross-legged on the deck as Sokka and his dad spread out maps of the northern seas and the rest of her friends gathered around. "This may be kind of obvious, but why are we trusting Azula?" She shot Katara a look, as the younger girl ran more healing water over her own back. "She sent an Earth Army after Zuko? Seriously? General Fong's... dead?"

"Very, very dead." Sokka looked almost green. "That was one of the worst nights of my life. Of all our lives. Ever. And the worst thing is? I can't even get mad at the guy for doing it. He was up against an army, and there were kids behind him, and a whole volcano ready to go..." He shuddered. "Can we not talk about that?"

Suki frowned, and reached out to pat him on the shoulder. "And you trust his sister?"

"We don't trust Azula." Aang looked at the map, shoulders slumped in a way that was a little sad, and more than a little scared. "But I trust Zuko."

"The guy who's been chasing you across the whole Earth Kingdom," Suki pointed out. "The Fire Lord's son."

"Fire Lord Ozai's *exiled* son," Shiyu said mildly.

"Who was chasing the Avatar so he wouldn't be exiled anymore," Suki argued.

"Yeah, well, he quit," Sokka shrugged. "Guess we know why now. Yue's got a *really weird* sense of humor."

"The Moon is a changeable spirit," the Fire Sage agreed. A little white around the eyes as he said it. "It's always been said the prince has no luck. I'd never believed that to be true, but... Agni. What a terrible burden."

"I..." For once, Katara looked like she was uncertain what she wanted to say. "Waterbending should be a *gift*."

"Not to a child of Fire." Shiyu folded his arms in a way the Kyoshi Island elders used to mean, *this discussion is over*.

Not that Suki intended to argue with him. There really had been ice dripping off the prince? Wasn't that - well, impossible? "Okay," she rubbed the hairs standing up on the back of her neck, "that's a *really* strange reason to trust someone."

"Take it from me. After a few rounds with the Dai Li? Fire Nation guys start to look way too

honest." Sokka tapped some of the most southernmost islands on the map, squinting at how far they were from the North Pole, and how near to Fire Nation waters. "Thing is, it's not, do we trust Azula. The real question is, what happens if we *don't*, and she's right?"

Suki really didn't want to think about that. Because that would mean the Fire Lord's daughter wanted to help the Avatar. And the Fire Nation never did *anything* that kept them from coming out on top. "It's the North Pole. Ice, snow, and a lot more ice. There's nothing up there to burn."

"But it's summer," Katara reminded her. "The sun won't go down for weeks."

...Which made Suki's head just *hurt*. The sun wasn't supposed to do that!

"And with Sozin's Comet lighting the sky, even the weakest firebender will not need fuel to burn," Shiyu said grimly. "Let us hope Prince Zuko reaches Asagitatsus swiftly. If the Fourth Death has finally been relocated, and no dragons have been tending it... the Comet might well be the last prod that brings the spirit to full rage."

Aang shuddered. "Maybe we should-"

"Big blue spirit-dragon that doesn't *like* you, remember? And eats Avatars?" Sokka shook his head. "Either Zuko keeps a lid on the blast, or he doesn't. The Northern Water Tribe builds everything out of ice. All Ozai has to do is start melting stuff, and they're gone."

Katara shuddered, back sparking with pain as still-tender skin objected. She could see it all too easily. The sculpted temple collapsing into a formless pool. Chief Arnook's meeting hall just slush seeping back toward the sea. Years, sometimes decades of crafting, gone in an instant. Everything the tribe owned would be lost to rising waters; tools, yak fodder, everything. Even if the Fire Lord didn't kill anyone, the next winter would.

"But they're waterbenders," Suki protested. "Why would anybody build out of ice?"

"Why do firebenders build places out of bamboo?" Sokka shrugged. "It's there. And if the bad guys come calling, it gives you more to throw at them. Zhao found that out the hard way. But he just had ships and regular firebenders. If Ozai's going to have the kind of firepower that took out the Air Temples, and he uses it all on the Northern Water Tribe..." He grimaced.

"It'll be bad," Aang said quietly.

"Worse than you think." Katara looked past the map, seeing that city of white and blue in memory. "Master Pakku trained us with ice. Water, too, but there was always ice around. If the Fire Nation melts the city around them - I only know how to pull water out of air because of... what Hama showed me. Does anyone at the North Pole know what to do when their ice melts?"

"If we believe Azula." Suki gave her a look askance. "Why would she tell us anything that's going to hurt the Fire Lord?"

"Possibly, because even one thought a dark dragon may be driven too far." Shiyu rubbed one ear, as if it burned. "Byakko watches over its own, even those of the Fire Lord's family. Prince Zuko told me his sister fled the Caldera in the wake of the invasion."

Katara waited, but that was apparently where the Fire Sage had decided to stop. Which made her want to *strangle* him. "So? What does that *mean*?"

Shiyu gave her a quizzical look. "Young lady?"

"And you guys call Sparky crazy." Toph crossed her arms on her lap, almost smirking. "At least he knows he's got problems talking to people."

"I think what they mean is, so Azula left the capital." Aang gave Shiyu a serious look. "Why does that make a difference in whether or not we believe her?"

Shiyu frowned at him. "You opened Avatar Roku's memories at the Winter Solstice. Surely, you recall what he knew of Fire Lord Sozin's court-"

"I didn't open his memories, I met *Avatar Roku*," Aang said impatiently. "I know he was Fire Lord Sozin's friend when they were kids, and he probably knew all kinds of stuff about the Caldera. But I don't. I'm not Roku!"

For a revered Fire Sage, Katara thought, Shiyu looked like he'd eaten a bug. And not one of the almost tasty Swampbender fried kind. "You don't know anything about Fire Lord Ozai's court," Shiyu managed. "Oh, Agni."

"Beat yourself up over it later." Toph wrinkled her nose at him. "Tell us why it makes a difference why we believe Azula now."

"Because... oh dear. Politics and history can be the study of a lifetime. I thought Avatar Aang would only need gentle hints of who might be trustworthy in the Fire Nation now..." Shiyu bent his head over his hands, thinking. "I hardly know where to begin. There are so many competing factions, so many divergent interests-"

"And you were in the faction that hoped Zuko just *might* get lucky." One hand holding down the map, Sokka gave him a narrow-eyed look. "You know, that would have worked out a lot better if you'd talked to the guy who was actually looking for Aang."

"Young man, I've had many conversations with General Iroh since he returned from Ba Sing Se six years ago-"

"It wasn't *Iroh's* life on the line!" Her brother's jaw worked, as if he wanted to be angry and sick at the same time. "Gah. I feel so stupid. No wonder Zuko wanted off this ship. It wasn't just Aang he was worried about, was it?"

"Sokka?" Hakoda asked, beating Katara to it.

"Zuko probably saw it the minute he knew you didn't tell him about the kanaloa," Sokka said grimly. "Took me until now to catch on. If that thing's like other evil spirits, it would have *eaten* an untrained firebender. You wouldn't dare let the Fire Lord's heir come near it, no matter how strong you thought he was. Unless you didn't want him to live to be the heir in the first place!"

What? Katara thought, chilled. Toph squeezed up against her, hand finding her arm and latching on.

"You didn't talk to Zuko because you didn't want *Zuko* to find Aang," Sokka barreled on. "You wanted Iroh!"

"Young man, I..." Shiyu took a deep breath, and sighed. "I would never have wished the young prince ill. I knew General Iroh would be clever enough to keep his nephew from Boiling Rock. Or I thought I did," he admitted, "until the prince appeared on the solstice. But what I wished for him does not matter. General Iroh is the true first-born heir of Azulon, no matter how Ozai might have forged the will. Lady Ursa... there is no proof of what she did. But it is known. And the child of a regicide cannot inherit. There is no greater proof of a dark dragon than to slay your own kin."

"That... that... You're a *Fire Sage*! Assassinating a domain lord is a legal way to stop a war, and you know it!" Sokka shot back.

Katara stared at her brother. Shared a stunned glance with Suki, and shrugged helplessly at her father when he looked taken aback. Explaining about Temul wasn't something she wanted to get into right now. Or maybe ever.

Sokka wasn't even looking. "And Fire Lord or no Fire Lord, *killing* a dark dragon is the duty of the clan, flat out! Ozai wouldn't do it, *Iroh* wouldn't do it - did you ever think maybe Ursa didn't have a choice?"

"Fire Lord Azulon was the true-born and only heir of Fire Lord Sozin," Shiyu stated, spine stiff. "There was no reason for his kin to raise a hand against him."

"Except Ozai's nuts," Toph shrugged. "And if he's nuts, what was Azulon?"

"As bad or worse. Just ask Byakko," Sokka said dryly. "Shidan's got all *kinds* of reasons Azulon needed to die. Starting with Lady Ran, Lord Kuzon, and a whole bunch of onmitsu assassins."

"Tribal elder arguments," Hakoda said, as if to himself. "That's always messy." He gave Katara a sympathetic look. "You weren't even born yet, and by the time you were old enough to understand Kanna had spent years soothing ruffled feathers. But it wasn't always decided that I would become the next chief. There were a few other candidates, and some good people had their own reasons to back them. It all got argued out eventually. But for almost a year, things were very tense." He gave Shiyu an up-and-down look. "The Fire Nation has to be loyal to the Fire Lord. But it sounds as if they *don't* have to be loyal to his chosen heir. And when you're talking about people, that means an argument. We invaded the Caldera after Azula failed to stop us. Whoever was backing her as the heir must have found themselves in a very tight spot."

"And if she fled the Caldera, that means Fire Lord Ozai failed to intervene on their behalf," Shiyu nodded. "She is out of the Fire Lord's favor. And if he withdrew his protection from his own daughter and heir... then it is likely that if she is caught, she will suffer her brother's fate."

Aang stared at him. Gray eyes narrowed, just a little.

"Avatar Aang?" Shiyu inquired.

"Azula's a scary person," Aang said firmly. "She's done horrible things. She might even be really evil. And I've *seen* evil. But you know what? None of that matters. Because I don't know everything Fire Lord Ozai did to Zuko, but I know enough. What happened to him shouldn't happen to *anybody* else. Not even Azula." He looked down a little, sad. "And all you're worried about is, is this going to make sure she's not the next Fire Lord."

"It may seem harsh," Shiyu started, "but it is crucial to our people-"

"It's *manipulating* people. It's *wrong*! It's - like the Temple Elders, they wanted to take me away from Master Gyatso, and I wasn't going to have any say in it-" Aang took a deep breath. "You know what? It's not going to matter anymore. As soon as I master Fire, Avatar Kyoshi's decree is going down."

"You..." The Fire Sage's eyes bugged. "Avatar Aang. Think of what you would do! The consequences to innocent people-"

"A lot of them are going to die. I know that!" Aang swallowed hard. "I know that. A lot of innocent people are going to die *anyway*. At least if I do this, they won't die because people who *think* they

know better want to pick who gets to be the next guy to go crazy trying to keep all of you from killing each other!"

Shiyu's jaw dropped.

"That's what Zuko says happens to the Fire Lords," Aang said firmly. "They have to keep all of your great names' loyalty, even when the nobles *hate* each other. Maybe I don't know how that works, but I see what it does. Temul of Shu Jing faced *Fire Lord Sozin* instead of breaking her word, when she knew he'd kill her. Kuzon spent his whole *life* trying to find me, and he died still trying. Zhao went after the Moon Spirit for the Fire Nation, and Iroh tried to stop him for the *world*. Firebenders... they're like setting off sparkler-rockets. You get them started, they don't stop until they hit a whole *mountain*. And a Fire Lord would have to... to try and hang onto all those people tearing away like rockets, and keep something kind of like hospitality with all of them, and *nobody* could do that! Katara couldn't do that, and she's one of the nicest people I know!"

Katara's face burned.

"Zuko and Azula and Fire Lord Ozai - everybody here thinks they're crazy," Aang went on. "*You* think they're crazy. And Iroh chased me with Zuko all winter. He's just as crazy as they are. He just doesn't look like it. Being Fire Lord - even being close to being Fire Lord - *makes you crazy*." He flung up his hands. "Maybe I don't know everything about being the Avatar, but people aren't supposed to be crazy! And the people who lead a whole kingdom *really* aren't supposed to be crazy. It's got to stop. And I'm going to stop it." He crossed his arms. "So if you think no Fire Lord means people are going to get hurt - figure out what we can do to *fix* that. Or at least, make it so less people get hurt." He gulped, but straightened. "You figure that out, and we'll... figure out what to do with what Azula told us. Right?"

"Right," Sokka said firmly. "I've got a few ideas." He raised a brow at Shiyu. "You want in?"

"Perhaps... later," Shiyu said shakily. "I am a Fire Sage, not a soldier. If Avatar Aang truly means to abolish Kyoshi's decree... I believe I must meditate on this."

Katara watched him make his way below, and had to wince. "He thinks his people are going to die."

Suki hugged herself. "I didn't meet a lot of good ones in Boiling Rock, but... if Shiyu's okay, he can't be the only one in the Fire Nation. That's got to be horrible."

"And that's kind of why I think we can believe Azula. Maybe," Sokka put in. "If Ozai is planning to take out the North Pole - okay, sure, fine, you take out the Northern Water Tribe. There's Katara and Swampbenders and Kyoshi Island waterbenders and who knows who else is out there. All Ozai's big plan is going to do is wipe out the one bunch of waterbenders who *weren't* in the war. It's going to be one big mess, Azula will have to pick up the pieces, and she's got a hundred years of history and a whole bunch of onmitsu telling her wiping out a whole nation *doesn't work*. She's going to get a Water Tribe Avatar dumped on her. A *ticked-off* Water Tribe Avatar. *Nobody* backstabs Crazy Blue Fire like that and gets away with it." He nodded at Aang. "She didn't kill you in the invasion when she had you down. I'm guessing that means she *is* telling the truth. She wants you alive. Which means this-" he tapped the copy of Zuko's scroll, "-might not be a lie either." Sokka chewed his lip. "Of course, wanting you alive *might* mean sending you off on a wild chinchilla-goose chase so you don't get hurt. Maybe."

"Azula?" Suki said under her breath. "Want someone to *not* get hurt?"

"Well... kind of, yeah," Aang said reluctantly. "She *is* Zuko's sister. She..." He groped for words.

"You didn't see what happened to General Fong. It was awful. But Zuko didn't make someone else start the fire that killed Fong's army. *He* did it." He took a deep breath. "Azula - she's awful, but she's *responsible*. Just like that. When she tells her people to do horrible things to our people, she's right there with them." He gave Suki a weak smile. "I know it sounds crazy, but I think... if Azula wanted me hurt, she'd do it herself."

Suki opened her mouth... then slowly, closed it. "Huh." She leaned a hand on the deck, thinking. "I didn't think about it much, when she came after Appa. The Fire Prince was chasing you, now it was the Fire Princess. What was the difference? But she fought us just like her sidekicks." She shook her head, as if eyeing an unpleasant memory. "She took us seriously, too. The Kyoshi Warriors have beaten a lot of benders because they think people who can't bend can't fight. She came right after me and didn't stop until I was down." She slanted a glance at Sokka. "I owe her a rematch."

"Somehow, I think we'll all get a chance..." Sokka trailed off, staring at the map. "Ooo. Yeah..."

Katara looked between him and her father. Who was smiling.

"And this is when I wish you guys would make maps out of dirt, like sane people," Toph grumped. "What? What do you *see*?"

"Not see. Exactly. But I know what we *could* see, and-" Sokka made himself stop, and rubbed his hands together. "This is an invasion, right? We've seen that. From both sides. It's a *lot* of work, and you've got to get everybody together before you go in, so you're sure they know what the plan is, and what did Azula do to us when *we* tried it?"

"Zuko told her we were coming," Hakoda pointed out.

"Yeah, well - the Earth King's *plan* told her we were coming," Sokka said ruefully. "We changed a whole bunch of details. But we couldn't change where we were going. If Ozai's really going after the Northern Tribe, he can't change where *he's* going, either. He's got to fly the airships north. They've got to have fuel. Only so many places they can pick it up before they have to start getting it from ships. And if he's going for the day the Comet hits - timing. We can get him on timing. He's *got* to be at or past certain islands in the next week or so, or it just won't work. We head there, we see what we can find, and we'll know."

"And if we know, we can do something about it," Aang said firmly. "If they need supplies to invade the Northern Water Tribe, then - no supplies, no invasion. It's one day. If Ozai misses the day of the Comet, then he *can't* kill the Northern Water Tribe." He took a deep breath, and let it all rush out in one big sigh. "There's something we can do. There really is."

"There's always something we can do, Aang," Hakoda said practically. "We just have to keep open eyes and an open mind, so we know it when we see it." He chuckled. "Though I never thought even an open mind would mean trusting the Fire Lord's daughter."

"We're not trusting Azula." Toph crossed her arms. "We're trusting *Zuko*."

"That's even harder to believe." Suki shook her head. "I know, I know; a lot's happened, and he did face down a monster for us. But after what he said to Aang..."

"That's kind of why I do trust him." Aang rubbed the back of his neck. "More than Iroh. Even more than Shiyu; and Shiyu knew he could die helping us. But he's a Fire Sage, so he did it anyway because... well. Because I'm the Avatar. I'm supposed to fix the world. That's what Iroh says. Shiyu, the Earth King... everybody thinks I'm going to fix everything."

"But you don't have to do it on your own," Katara said firmly.

"And that helps. A lot," Aang admitted. "But you guys still think I'm going to fix things. And Zuko doesn't. He doesn't like me. He thinks I'm trouble. And... I guess I kind of am. Maybe not just because of me. Maybe because everybody expects I'm going to pull some awesome spirit powers out of nowhere and somehow nobody will get hurt except the bad guys. But Zuko's going up north to stop a killer volcano, just because *somebody's* got to do it. He doesn't want my help. He's..." Aang looked at Toph with odd, dawning wonder. "He's doing what yāorén were supposed to be doing all these centuries. Stomping on a problem when it's small, before it gets so big you have to have an Avatar to fix it all."

"If you think Asagitatsu's a small problem, you're the one who needs your eyes checked," Toph said pointedly. "Do us all a favor, Twinkletoes. Don't tell Zuko he's doing what he's *supposed* to be doing. Sparky's had it up to *here* with spirits," she waved a hand way above her head, "and if you set off that sparkler-rocket, the whole mountain's gonna blow before he's got a chance to cool down."

"Um." Aang gulped. "Good point."

"Seriously?" Suki said to Sokka in an undertone. "Zuko could set off a *mountain*?"

"It's a really touchy mountain." Sokka winced. Spread his hands apart. "Has a dragon-spirit, big as... um. Bigger than the serpent in Serpent's Pass. With wings. And fire. Incinerates drowned zombies in one breath. Did I mention touchy?"

"Drowned?" Suki shuddered.

"Yeah. Found that out the hard way," Aang said sheepishly. "But Zuko and Langxue and the others are handling it. And they're not asking for help. They kind of just want me to stay out of the way. Not like... well. Almost everyone else."

Katara had to look away. "Zuko doesn't want to use you." Her heart sank. "Not like I have."

"You never used me." Aang leaned toward her, serious and worried. "None of you guys have. You help me. All the time. Even when you're just there. And I help you. That's what being friends is."

Katara rubbed her hands over each other, trying not to feel the pulse of blood under her skin. "But I've made so many mistakes."

"Well... yeah. Me too." Aang reddened. "Master Gyatso said that's part of learning to be a good person. If you don't make any mistakes - you're not trying hard enough." His ears were all pink. "And you guys forgive me when I make mistakes. How can I not forgive you?" He shrugged, and gave her a penguin-sledding grin. "Now, if we could just teach the spirits to figure that out, this whole mess would get a lot simpler!"

Chapter 82

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Back to the smooth stone wall in a shadowy corner of Dragons' Wings' new town hall, Agent Shirong watched flying notes, maps, and almost fists, as everyone with a scrap of authority in the settlement tried to figure out what was going on at once. "Sometimes, I love my job."

A little out of the shadows, Guard Huojin gave him a *look*.

It wasn't nearly as venomous as the looks Dai Li got used to. There was actually a little concern in it. So Shirong waved an expansive hand, willing to explain. "All the yelling is right here. No malcontents brooding in shadowed corners. No simmering tension because everyone pretends the war doesn't exist. All the malice that would normally draw spirits is getting aired out and beaten with sticks. Whatever's left will be small, weak, and easily managed when it does rear a spirit's head." He smiled wryly. "Thankfully. Asagitatsu's still touchy, despite all our work. A bit closer to a snarly lion-dillo than a trainload of blasting jelly now, but still nothing to trifle with."

Huojin blinked at him. "Fire Lord Ozai is bringing a *fleet of airships*. Right to our doorstep. Even if he does plan to take them to the North Pole after. And you're worried about spirits?"

Be on lookout for airship invasion of Northern Water Tribe, part of Zuko's terse hawk-message had read; sent ahead, before Byakko's ship could bring him into the harbor. *Sources: Fire Lord intends Comet assault. Prep for air fleet diversion and/or target practice. Consult Teo, companions for air current info.*

Which was a short and almost diplomatic way of saying, everyone had to get ready for potential flaming death from above. And by the way, they had to talk mostly pacifist gliders into coughing up information to save people they didn't even *know*.

When Zuko gets more than a breath to think, Shirong thought, *Teruko and I need to remind him that there are differences between difficult and impossible.*

Granted, dealing with Teo was far from impossible. The young man was here, after all, his own notes tucked in his lap. The gliders did, if grudgingly, admit it was better to have allies than to try and eke out a living on the roof of the world alone. But even if some of them were born airbenders, the Mechanist's people were still very much a small Earth village. Their nearest neighbors came first. Outsiders had to prove themselves, again and again.

Still, Teo had come. If mostly to get any scrap of news of his father. And he'd gotten news all right. "He's fine," Zuko had reported as soon as Teo's wheels squeaked up the hall ramp. "He's with Chief Hakoda. Looks okay. Misses you. I would have put it in a message, but sometimes even hawks get caught."

So now the glider was slumped in his chair, ignoring the yelling around him to just breathe. And smile, with the kind of whole-hearted relief Shirong had felt realizing that yes, their ice-bound train *was* going to float.

And if that's not a cue from the spirits, I don't know what is. "Yes, I am," Shirong answered Huojin thoughtfully. "We have firebenders, earthbenders, and waterbenders. We've been warned. We're already shaping shelters for our people, even if Ozai scorches everything above them to ashes. But

if Asagitatsu goes up..." He shrugged.

"Okay, point," Huojin sighed.

"Besides, if the Fire Lord does show up..." Shirong allowed himself a *nasty* smile. "Spirits may not be able to tell most humans apart very well. But the people who follow an exile, versus those still bound under Avatar Kyoshi's decree? I think Asagitatsu will know very well who belongs here. And who doesn't." He rubbed a bit of obsidian between his fingers, contemplating the irony of delicate glass formed by all the fury of earth and fire. "Though I admit, the balance between the spirits here isn't a sure thing. Ozai is acting under Kyoshi's decree. That gives his actions a sort of... weight. Like a boulder, ready to roll downhill."

"Damn it. Never wanted to know anything about spirits..." Huojin sighed, hand almost drifting to his sword. "All right, tell me. You sound like it's just one side of a bar brawl."

"In a sense," Shirong nodded. "Ozai may be acting in line with Kyoshi's decree, but our young prince helped the living Avatar. If there's confusion among the spirits on whose side they should favor... well, at least it should be equal confusion."

Sage acquired, Zuko's message had gone on. Tossed at student. Student and companions reunited with allies. Leaving them to own devices. Thank Agni.

Shirong hoped *tossed at* had been a figure of speech. With what he now knew about dragon-children, he wasn't at all sure.

Though *leaving them to own devices* was even more ominous than manhandling a Fire Sage. That phrase had the same sort of teeth-gritted, about to set off sparks feel to it as Zuko's current glare at his uncle across the map table. Shirong wouldn't be in the middle of that battle of wills for all the jade in Ba Sing Se.

Though unlike some of the more nervous onlookers, he at least knew why those two hotheads were glaring at each other. And it didn't have anything to do with the graying waterbender now comparing Fire-influenced Southern Tribe techniques with Amaya's Earth-touched Northern moves at one side of the hall.

...Well, not much.

Need-to-know info on Boiling Rock was critically lacking, the message had read. Research Kanaloa. Shirong: Earthbending effective but not sufficient to deter spirit. Langxue: Any other info on spirit? Ask Prof. Wen? Gen. Iroh: Not Amused.

Having now wrung a few details on the kanaloa out of Amak - and a few more out of Iroh, mostly furious denials that he'd known about *any* spirits at Boiling Rock - Shirong understood that completely. The haima-jiao had been terrifying enough with only Amaya under its thrall. A fire-water spirit able to suck in an unprepared Avatar- His mind shied from the thought.

It'd be bad. How bad, I'm glad I don't know.

And the worst part was, their young prince probably felt guilty the mess had happened in the first place. He'd advised Sokka to look at Boiling Rock. Never mind that he hadn't known about the danger.

No, not the worst, Shirong decided. The Fire Sages had underestimated Zuko as much as everyone else had, yes. But what truly unsettled a Dai Li was that apparently *Iroh* hadn't known about the kanaloa, either. Which implied-

Well. It implied quite a few unpleasant things. But the most important one to anyone who cared about the young man who had faced the spirit...

If Zuko ended up sent to Boiling Rock, Shirong thought, the Fire Sages didn't believe Iroh would rescue him.

And that was one of the more charitable interpretations of the Sages' actions. Shirong grimaced, thinking of a few others.

"Oh, that's not a good look," Huojin groaned. "Hit me and get it over with."

"We should never let a Fire Sage be alone with the prince," Shirong said simply.

The guard gave him a look askance. "Most of them are loyal to Ozai. No kidding."

"Most of them are loyal to the true Fire Lord," Shirong corrected him. "That may not be the same thing."

"...I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"Heh." Shirong relaxed a bit. At least Huojin was honest about it. "It occurred to me that if I were a Fire Sage, loyal to the Fire Lord, unable to raise a hand against the royal family, and yet utterly convinced that Ozai's children should never inherit, especially Azula..."

"Nope, not going to like it at all," Huojin muttered.

"Then I might consider the fact that young men do noble and idealistic - and *stupid* - things," Shirong went on. "And that if Azula cared about nothing else in the world, she did seem focused on obliterating all her brother's hopes." He tapped a finger against obsidian. "So. Give him just enough information on the Avatar that eventually he'll figure out there has to be more, and come back. Meaning he breaks the terms of his exile, leading to either execution or confinement in the deepest pit of a dungeon the Fire Nation has."

"Boiling Rock." Huojin looked like the words had squirmed in his throat.

"Exactly." Shirong's eyes narrowed. "They didn't think Zuko could ever be a master firebender. So either the kanaloa would take him, or it wouldn't. What was important was that Azula *is* a master. And she'd come to gloat. And if anyone would know how to make sure a spirit that hates iron could go past those protections..."

"A Fire Sage would," Huojin agreed warily. "But why would anyone *want* to have Ozai's daughter possessed-" He cut himself off, paling.

"The Dai Li have the authority to kill even the highest nobles in Ba Sing Se, if there's no other way to save the city," Shirong nodded. "I'd imagine the Fire Sages have similar latitude. After all, if she were possessed by a rampaging spirit... they'd just be protecting the Fire Lord."

Huojin eyed him, and shivered. "I am *so* glad I'm not you."

"Sometimes I wish I weren't, either." Shirong sighed. "One of us should have gone with him. Though given what happened, I wouldn't have been much help. Water. Not my field of expertise."

"A whole damn ocean with a broken head isn't anybody's *expertise*," Huojin growled. "I'm going to get a straight answer out of him on what happened. And then I'm siccing my girls on him."

"Ouch," Shirong murmured. Though he understood the impulse. *Uncovered new need-to-know info on ocean and coastal hazards*, that bit of the message had read. *Tropical sea serpent. Langxue: Skeleton accurate size. Apparently not immune to cloud-to-ground lightning. Ribs healing.*

Lightning. Oh yes. He definitely understood the urge to throttle some straight answers out of the prince.

But he wouldn't. Knowing Zuko, if he admitted to the ribs he'd probably dealt with a host of lesser injuries, along with all the effects of a night adrift. Shirong might avoid the sea where possible, but he'd talked with enough of Jee and Donghai's sailors to have an idea of how nasty it had been. *Lucky he wasn't further north*, had been the consensus. *Cold water kills faster.*

Though luck hadn't had anything to do with it. Which was why their two main firebenders were glaring at each other hard enough to make the room hazy.

Iroh was the first to move; one hand flicking the matter away. "You cannot shun the Avatar!"

Zuko was unfazed, gold eyes not even narrowed. "I already have."

Avatar Aang is shunned, that heart-sinking part of the message had read. *Gen. Iroh: Review available info shunning, cross-reference attempted manslaughter domain lords. Capt. Jee etc.: Treat as possible enemy. Do not allow on Asagitatsu.*

Oh yes. That had *definitely* put the catowl amongst the sparrowkeets.

"He is the spirit of the world," Iroh stated. "We face formidable enemies in both this world and that of the spirits. The Face-Stealer, the drowned, my brother; Asagitatsu herself, if she is not satisfied. We cannot turn against one who would be our ally!"

"What part of *tried to kill me* did you not hear?" Zuko bit out. "And before you say it was an accident - yes! Exactly! He tried to kill me, *by accident!* Is *that* the person you want stepping into the middle of a volcano about to erupt? When Asagitatsu *already* doesn't like him? When we know the Face-Stealer pulled everybody's strings to make sure Asagitatsu killed Avatar Yangchen?" He brought a fist down on the table; the *thump* made half the people listening twitch. "This is our *last chance*. Agni loves us, but there's been too much blood shed. Too many lives and spirits twisted up so that nobody knows what's right anymore. If Aang blunders in here the way he blunders in *everywhere else*, we will all be *dead*. And he will be dead *with us*, and the Face-Stealer *wins*." Zuko drew a deliberate breath, letting a wisp of steam escape. "Well, not on my watch. I've lost too much to the Avatar and the Fire Lords and the *spirits* and the whole. Damn. *Mess*. We are going to *fix this*." He straightened in his chair. "We stopped General Fong. We can stop the Fire Lord."

Which made Shirong feel oddly warm, even as his stomach tried to take a dive through the floor. Facing the Fire Lord...

But we did defeat Fong, the Dai Li reminded himself. *If Zuko believes we can do this - maybe we should believe, too.*

"He's bringing airships and supply ships with troops, not marching an army overland," Zuko went on. "Airships will be tricky. Granted. But airships are a direct threat to the Air Temple. They're not shy about mixing it up with the Fire Nation when they want to live. Bring the airships down, and we've got half the battle fought. As for the supply ships, Asagitatsu's own fires give us a way to take them down. And if they put those out..." Zuko's eyes glittered. "The drowned want lives. That would be the last mistake those ships *ever* make."

Iroh was shaking his head, a doubtful scowl on his face. "If the Fire Lord comes on the Day of the Comet-

"Uncle, he can't," Zuko said soberly. "Not if he wants to use it against the Northern Water Tribe. At the airships' best speed, even if they're twice as fast as we've seen, it'd take three days to get from here to the North Pole. If he uses the Comet against us, he won't have it against them. And he's my father and he's crazy. Not an *idiot*. He knows heat rises. And he may not know how many firebenders we have here but he knows *you're* here. And, again, he is *not* an idiot." Zuko took a deep breath. "If he attacks here, and with our luck he probably *will* - we'll be facing firebenders. *Not* the Comet." The prince's sober look lightened, into a smirk that made Shirong reflexively glance around for death-defying drops or highly flammable enemies. "I got details from Sokka while we were heading to the Western Temple. Those airships carry explosives. *Lots* of explosives." An almost gleeful shrug. "Fuse, fire-ice, a few catapults..."

Iroh stared. Rubbed at what was probably a headache.

Couldn't happen to a nicer guy, Shirong mused. The Fire General's mood had ranged from grimly cheerful to downright *amused* while the rest of Dragons' Wings had been dreading the approach of an Earth Army. General Iroh had had no trouble facing *Earth* General Fong.

Facing Fire Lord Ozai? Heh. No, he wasn't nearly so happy about that.

Granted, the man was family. But Zuko and Azula were brother and sister, and he hadn't seen Iroh have any qualms about asking Zuko to face Azula. At least, not when it was to protect the Avatar.

Sauce for the chinchilla-geese is sauce for the gander, as they say, Shirong thought dryly. *Shoe pinches when it's on your foot, doesn't it?*

"...You have given this some thought," Iroh said at last.

"The Fire Lord does not tolerate challenges to his authority." Pale gold glittered.

Jee winced. Shirong made a note to corner the captain later, and determine exactly what he knew about the circumstances of Zuko's exile. Likely quite a lot, the way Iroh had glanced aside. Which was *not* something Zuko had expected, from the way his good eye narrowed. Surprise stoked a white heat of fury in the young prince, so hot the Dai Li almost felt his skin searing-

Then it eased, as Zuko let steam hiss from his breath. "Yes, I've thought about it. I know a lot of us have; though we all hoped the war wouldn't land on our doorstep this soon. But it has. So. What do we have ready? What do we have that could be ready, if we've got a few weeks? What do we need to shut down, until the Comet's gone, and we know one way or another who's left standing?"

He looked to the crowd of his people, and the answers started coming.

Shirong listened with half an ear, mentally juggling numbers and speakers to see if they agreed with reports he'd already read. The shelters were all but complete, earthbent into the caldera wall itself; if it had preserved the White Lotus cache through the last blast, it was their best chance. More supplies and half of the first new crops had been stored up in the Northern Temple. In the event of a blast, Changchang and the rest of the elders had already agreed to take in any of Dragons' Wings who made it there. The Temple-dwellers *should* make it; Teo and his friends had apparently taken some of the same sealing and filtering devices Ji had used to close off natural gas leaks, and come up with screens that ought to let air in but keep lung-destroying ash at bay.

That was above. As for below - the drowned had been seen in the deep waters, but they hadn't

surfaced again. Fire watches had been kept every night, with memorials every dusk, and each one seemed to draw in another restless ghost to find peace. It'd take years at the current rate, but Amaya and everyone else who dealt with spirits believed the harbor would eventually be safe again. Of course, if Asagitatsu decided to take an active hand...

"How are we doing relieving the magma pressure?" Zuko gave Shirong a direct look.

"Slow, but apparently steady," the Dai Li reported. "Our dragon-lady seems to have taken Lady Bei Fong's earthbending in good humor. Professor Wen and his associates have managed to nudge trickles of steam to the surface in several locations, and according to our local airbenders..." He glanced at Langxue. Who grinned, just a little sharply, and poked Teo in the shoulder.

The glider started, looking up from his maps. Reddened a little at all the eyes on him, but drew himself up in his chair with confidence. "The pressure's a lot better. Compared to how it was when Fong hit the pass, at least. More like an eggshell than a soap bubble. If we have a few more months, we can do this."

"We might not have a few more months," Zuko grumbled. Looked up at stricken faces, and sighed. "We've got to keep trying. Every day we take the pressure off her, everybody gets safer. Right now, if Asagitatsu goes up, she'll make a *smaller* hole." The prince grimaced. "I know that doesn't sound like much. But that could mean our shelters make it. That the gliders make it. That Ba Sing Se won't starve just from the ash-fall; and we've all got people we care about down there. Earth King Kuei took in some of my people, and damn it, I want to see him kick Wan Shi Tong's *ass*."

That got grins, especially from the sailors. Shirong made a mental note to check just what they'd been up to, those last few hectic hours in Ba Sing Se.

"Teo, if your wind-maps are right... the ash will still head for the North Pole, even if most of it blows south afterward. We need to talk to the Northern Water Tribe, and send them a message to warn them what's coming." Zuko glanced down at the map. "That's not going to be easy."

Because even in the middle of summer, the seas up there were icy, Shirong knew. Sane hawks didn't go that way, and neither did sane sailors. Which meant they *might* be able to talk Donghai into it...

"Not so difficult as you may believe." Iroh stroked his beard. "I have invited a few friends already."

"...What."

Shirong watched them both intently, almost ignoring the guard beside him. *A pity Kuei didn't grow up with siblings. If he'd grown up with Azula... er, Guanyin grant, someone not quite that bad... well. He would have known when Long Feng started managing him.*

As Zuko obviously *did* know; Shirong could see it in the pallor of tightened lips.

"I do not know precisely when they will arrive," Iroh went on, apparently oblivious to the nerve he'd struck, "but it should be soon. Perhaps later today."

Zuko was silent, perhaps a second too long. "Did you consult with Master Amaya on the details of their visit?" he said at last. "The Water Tribes know about the drowned, and I suspect they will take precautions, but it's hard for anyone to grasp how *many* are out there."

Ooof. Loaded question, oh yes...

Huojin leaned in. "What the hell's going on?" A bare whisper; not a hint of hiss that would make it carry. "Zuko's the domain lord here. Just ask the volcano-dragon."

"Better yet, ask Fong's ashes," Shirong murmured back. "I know that and you know that. Apparently the general hasn't quite grasped the concept."

In a way, that made things worse. Long Feng had *known* he had no right to claim the city. General Iroh - former *Crown Prince* Iroh - seemed to see command as automatically flowing to him. Why should it rest anywhere else?

He's never had to deal with a recruit who's grown up enough to be his equal, Shirong concluded. Not that I've had many. I hope Quan and the rest are holding together. We left them in a sticky situation. Though not quite as sticky as ours. I hope.

He needed to spend some time with his family. Remind himself what this was all for, when everything seemed bleakest.

And it wouldn't be a bad idea to talk to Tingzhe about youngsters, and growing up, and how to handle it, Shirong considered. He and Min were fighting about the Dai Li before we left Ba Sing Se. Not so much now that we're in pursuit of spirits and enemies, and not honest men. But he knows what it's like. Maybe he has a few ideas.

Any ideas would be welcome right now. Lee and Mushi had been an apprentice healer and his tea-master uncle; a fight between them would only rattle the other denizens of their apartment building. A fight between General Iroh and Prince Zuko? There was no way this could end well.

And the worst of it is, neither of them wants to fight. Shirong hid a grimace. I have to talk to Tingzhe.

For more reasons than one. Meixiang's ancestor Gyokuro had been a Fire Sage, and Shirong had seen well enough that she knew a few of their teachings. If anyone here could help him unravel what the Fire Sages might have intended for Ozai, Iroh, and Zuko, it would be his adopted sister.

"Let me know immediately when any Water Tribe vessels are sighted," Zuko instructed Captain Jee and the rest of the sailing contingent. "We don't want any misunderstandings. On any side." He glanced at Shirong. "Let's see if Asagitatsu might give us some hints about settling her down sooner."

Asagitatsu sighed in her sleep, content. Death and destruction. Life and warmth. Both were in her nature. How fortunate she was, to have a dragon clan that nurtured both.

Fire and Water. Water and Fire.

One worked with the steady, grim haste of an antlion, digging into earth and stone to turn deadly steam to harmless, rising wind. The other whispered among the waves, gathering the wronged dead to her call. Both were just. Both had been wronged. Both sought recompense for evil done centuries ago, and fresh blood shed within the last season's turn. Their purpose shone in the spirit world like paired blades; one dazzling as sun on the sea, the other dark and silent as moonless night.

It made her weep, the beauty of those blades. And to sense them ready themselves, preparing to strike, duel, kill...

Fire kills to live. Who would have my gifts, must sacrifice.

Which would live, and which would die... that was the interesting question.

He shunned me.

It was like sticking his tongue under a loose tooth, Aang thought, sitting between Appa's horns so all he had to hear was the rush of wind. He just couldn't leave it alone.

Zuko shunned me.

Part of him wanted to curl up in Appa's fur and just bawl. Not because the world had ended. Because it *hadn't*. He was shunned, which meant the whole world ought to turn their faces away from him, except-

The rest of the world wasn't the Temples. The rest of the world didn't know. And most of those who did know, didn't care.

Which meant Temul *hadn't been lying*.

She was a ghost and she was awful and she'd done something horrible to Sokka just because he was Aang's friend. Because she wanted revenge on the Avatar, and she didn't care who she hurt to get it. But she *wasn't* a liar.

We shunned evil people at the Temples, and they went away, Aang thought, huddled in on himself in misery. *Where did we think they went away to?*

Funny, how the Elders had never mentioned that.

They didn't mention a lot of things.

"Hey." Sokka's voice, as the Water Tribesman made his careful way up Appa's neck, sword over his shoulder. "You okay?"

"No." Aang looked down at the reins in his hands. "Everything's so messed up."

"From what I've heard, it took at least a thousand years to get this messed up." Sokka gave him a serious look, wind ruffling his wolf-tail. "There's plenty of blame to go around. Don't cow-hog all of it."

Aang shifted his shoulders, feeling guilty. "I thought you were planning stuff with Fire Sage Shiyu."

"Yeah. About that? Turns out Fire Sages know a lot more about spirits than armies. And Shiyu doesn't know anything about airships. Except they're supposedly against the laws of nature, and should never ever work, and he still can't believe any firebender would break the root of his form and get on one." Sokka coughed, but blue eyes were full of mischief. "Right now, Katara's got an icepack on his head to keep his lunch down."

"He gets airsick?" Aang blurted out. "Oh, that's awful. Master Gyatso used to have ginger candy for people. I wish I had some... um?" Because Sokka was giving him a measuring look; a little happy, and a little relieved.

"It's okay. Katara's got this." Sokka waved a hand. "She doesn't have anything as nice as ginger candy, but he'll pull through." Propped up on his elbows, he gave Aang a serious stare. "You know you don't have to do this all on your own, right? And you don't have to do it all at once. All we

have to do is delay Ozai's fleet so he can't use the Comet on anybody-

"I know, I know; people were fighting before I got back, they're not going to stop just because the Comet's gone. But the Avatar's supposed to *fix* things." Aang scowled, frustrated. "Like Avatar Kyoshi, making it so Chin couldn't ever attack her village again... um." His shoulders drooped. "I guess that didn't work out so well. Changing the land like that, yanking the sea right into lava; that probably made a lot of spirits unhappy."

"When it happened that fast? Yeah, probably," Sokka agreed. "But lava and water run into each other in the Fire Nation all the time. It doesn't have to make spirits upset. At least not bad enough to go after humans," he amended. "Gran-Gran says spirits get upset every time summer freezes into winter, too. And every time the winter ice cracks and the snow spirits have to sleep while the sun's strong. They don't like it, but they live with it. Humans have to be careful at the change of the seasons, the spirits get grouchy, but it passes. The spirits know their season will come back. They just need time to think it over."

"Time." Aang rubbed his fingers through Appa's fur, treasuring the rumble he got in return. "That's the real problem. There's just not enough time."

"...If you say the Avatar Spirit might let you play with time, I'm going to have to sit on you." Sokka was wide-eyed as a badger-frog, one eyebrow twitching. "'Cause if you went back from the future to fix the past, wouldn't that make the past be part of the future, and... head hurting now."

"Uh-uh. Time's not an element." Aang shook himself at the thought, weirded out. Sokka was right; that was enough to make anybody's head hurt. "It's just... that's what got Kyoshi, isn't it? She ran out of time. Earth's supposed to sit and wait, but she waited too long. With Chin and with the fire pirates." He chewed that over a little more. "Master Gyatso said the smallest breeze can divert the mightiest storm. You just have to put that breeze in the right place..."

Sokka whistled. "And the right time?"

"Yeah. Like-" Aang winced, remembering screams and fire.

Sokka sucked in a breath. "Do I want to know?"

"Zuko. And General Fong." Aang swallowed. "It was awful, but... if he waited, it would have been so much worse."

"Because Fong would have been in the village. Yeah." Sokka shuddered. "I hate to say it, but if you know somebody's not going to stop - no. Don't wait." He paused, and grimaced. "Maybe try to hit them with something that won't kill them, if you think you can talk to them later. But don't wait." He sat up a little. "You've got a plan? I thought I was supposed to come up with the plans."

"Not a plan. Just an idea," Aang admitted. "The Fire Lord's not going to listen, right? Not as long as he thinks he can use the Comet to beat the Water Tribes. But what about after that? When he can't, and the Comet's gone for another hundred years?" He took a deep breath. "Roku said I had to defeat the Fire Lord by the end of summer. Zuko says Fire Lord Ozai won't stop unless somebody kills him. But Roku *didn't* say I had to kill him." Another breath. He felt a little lightheaded. "Isn't losing one battle a defeat?"

"...Technically," Sokka said at last. "Very tricky use of words." He scowled. "Which kind of makes it sound even more like something a spirit would really mean. Huh."

"So... if I want to do something that's not big, and doesn't have to kill a lot of people, and do it in

time..." Aang gulped. "Airships need the wind. What if I made a storm? A little one, out at sea, so innocent people don't get hurt."

"Whoof." Sokka's fingers clenched in thick fur.

Aang winced. "Bad idea?"

"Maybe not," Sokka said thoughtfully. "It could work. If we can find them."

"We can find them," Aang said, confident now. "The wind will show us the way."

"If Avatar spirity weirdness kicks in and helps out, I'm all for it," Sokka shrugged, peering out toward the horizon. "But if Ozai's already past our best guess for his supply bases, I don't know where we should look."

"Who needs to be the Avatar?" Aang gave him his best air-cake-tossing grin. "I'm an airbender, and it's summer. If Ozai wants to make it all the way up to the North Pole in time, he's got to take the high wind-road."

"The... what?"

"The fast way north," Aang explained. "It's summer, remember? The high wind-road's going to go right from the northern Fire Islands up toward the Northern Water Tribe. And from there it dips back over the mountains and pushes things back toward Ba Sing Se." He waited for an answer; shrugged when Sokka only blinked at him. "That's why I think Azula isn't lying. If the Fire Lord times it right, he can sweep right over the Water Tribe and still get back to start a whole bunch of fires in the Earth Kingdom before the Comet's gone. It makes sense."

"The fast way," Sokka said numbly. "We spent days getting north the last time! You never said there was a faster way."

"Because it's not there in the winter," Aang said, puzzled. "You use sails. You know that the winds change in different seasons..." He frowned into the breeze, thinking about that. "Only that's down near the surface. And the high wind-road's *really* high."

"Aang? Let me get a map."

"That's okay," Aang waved him off, "I've got one."

"Yeah, you've got the one with the crazy... arrows... on it..." Sokka smacked himself in the forehead. "Why didn't you *say* those were winds?"

"What else would they be?" Aang unrolled the old scroll that had lasted through the ice with him. "See how this one curves up past the Western Air Islands? That wind pretty much follows the current up north of the Fire Nation. If they take that, it pushes you up here." He tapped the thick dotted arrows in summer-red. "See? You get up to here - you have to get really high, but I bet they can - and the wind pushes you *fast*. Maybe five times as fast as Appa could fly on his own, even going all out."

Sokka caught the edge of the map before it could slap him in the face. "But if this is right, then the wind goes right over-"

"Yep!" Aang said cheerfully. "That's why we went there first on the way north. Even in winter it's the shortest way. In summer, it's *really* fast..."

Oh. Oh, that was bad.

Sokka swallowed. "Ozai's going to head straight for Asagitatsu."

For a long moment, all Aang wanted to do was hide again. Couldn't the spirits give him just a little break? Ever?

Except he already knew this was coming. Maybe that was all the break they could manage.

Aang rolled up his map, determined. "Then we're going to find him first."

Chapter End Notes

Gentlemen and ladies, I give you the jet stream. It is awesome.

Ironically, besides the Air Nomads, the people most likely to know about high-level winds are the Fire Nation. Messenger hawks are implied to fly for very long distances; even from the Fire Nation to Toph's home village in the Earth Kingdom. The easiest way they could do that is to use air currents like the jet stream. Put that together with Fire Lord Sozin getting the chance to raid the Air Temples for maps, and they could know a lot.

Soundtrack thoughts:

Shirong POV - Two Steps From Hell, "Dragon Rider".

Asagitatsu - Within Temptation, "I Wish I Had An Angel".

Gaang - "Invincible".

Chapter 83

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"...So that's how the high wind-road works in summer," Aang summed up, finger tracing arrows on the map that led from the middle of the ocean up the west coast of the Earth Kingdom and past Asagitatsu north, before they dipped back down into the middle of the Eastern Continent. "If the Fire Lord wants to invade the North Pole on the day of Sozin's Comet and still hit the Earth Kingdom, that's how he's got to go."

Katara let Toph lean against her on the deck. The earthbender might be in a better mood now that she knew Zuko was alive, but she still hated ships. Especially wooden ships, that didn't have metal she could scrunch her toes into.

And at that, she was doing better than Shiyu. The poor Fire Sage had been about as seasick as a person could get and still be alive. At least the sea-cinnamon tea seemed to be helping now. He was actually able to sit on Hakoda's deck and listen, without dashing to the rail every few minutes.

Aang drew his finger back down, not far south of the abbey where they'd found Bato and Sokka had beaten a shirshu with perfume. "And that's the best place for me to stop him. If I push the wind and the warm water down here," he dragged his finger farther south, "storms are really easy to get started. It'll have enough strength to hold together when I reach the invasion fleet, and then..." His shoulders slumped. "It's going to be awful. But if I can hit them with a storm here - mostly they're the only ones who should get hurt."

"Mostly?" Shiyu gave him a concerned frown. Winced, and rubbed some of Katara's ice over his forehead. "I know it's early in the year for storms, but surely those who dwell on the coast are prepared."

"There's always one cranky old geezer who can't let the fish get away," Sokka grumbled. "Trust me. I've been there." He poked the map himself. "Yeah, messy. But it sounds like it could be a controlled messy. I think that's the best we're going to get."

Aang took a deep breath. "But what about the drowned?"

Shiyu sighed. "There are some risks that must be taken, if my people are to be brought back to the will of the world. So long as the Face-Stealer does not seize them, the drowned will seek their homes in the Fire Nation. The great names will deal with them."

"Some of them will," Sokka said sourly. "The one good thing about this plan is there won't be a lot of people *drowning*. One of those war balloons falls out of the sky, it's going to be like hitting a mountain-" He saw Aang's stricken look, and winced. "Sorry."

"I hate this." Aang hugged himself tightly. "I really, really hate this."

"I know," Katara said softly. "We all know that, Aang."

He kept looking at her, gray eyes almost pleading. She didn't look away. But she didn't bend, either.

You want me to say I hate it too, Katara thought. But I don't. I can't. I told you, I'll never turn my back on people who need me. And everyone the Fire Lord is going to attack needs me. I can't think

killing people is wrong just because, Aang. I wish you could understand that.

"I know it's not really going to help," Sokka sighed. "But they're Fire Nation. If they're anything like the people we know - they'd rather get hit by one big hammer-smash of wind than get sucked under by the ocean."

Aang shook his head. "Dying is dying."

"No, it is not," Shiyu said firmly. "Not to the ghost left to pass over. For one of Fire to die by Water is a dreadful shock to the spirit. Storm and wind are not a kind death, but they do not so rend the soul. If the Face-Stealer seeks to twist their spirits after such a death, he will have to work to do so." The sage folded his hands, cloth-wrapped ice set aside. "If it must be done, we will do it cleanly. How can we help?"

"I... kind of don't think you can," Aang sighed. "I'm going to be bending in the middle of a storm. And if I get close enough to be sure where the storm hits them, I'm going to be bending with people throwing fire at me. In wind and waves and hail and all kinds of mess." He looked up, determined. "I can fly in that. Appa can't."

"We did okay in the last storm," Sokka objected.

"Almost drowning isn't okay," Aang shot back. "And the time before that, the last time Appa and I ended up in a storm that bad, I got frozen for a *hundred years*. I'm not doing that again. I just found you guys. I'm not sleeping for another century while the world goes to pieces because I'm not here!" He gulped, fingering his airstaff. "That iceberg took everyone away from me. Even Bumi. He's all old, and *responsible*, even if he acts crazy. I can't... I can't lose everybody again." He stared at the deck, shoulders slumped. "I know the Avatar's supposed to be detached and let people go. But I *can't*. I need you guys to be alive. To be safe. If you come with me on Appa, I'd be worrying about you when I should be worrying about the Fire Lord. That just won't *work*." Aang took a deep breath and looked around at them all. "You keep telling me I don't have to do this alone. And you're right. I'm *not* doing this alone. You're going to take care of Appa, and Fire Sage Shiyu, and you're going to warn the Northern Water Tribe. So I'm not doing this alone."

"I rather think I'm old enough to look after myself," Shiyu murmured.

Toph smirked, folding her arms. "Say that again when you're not kissing the rail every hour."

"I'd like to see you do as well in one of those accursed war balloons," Shiyu said, just as dry. "Being surrounded by one's opposing element is no place for a true master." He pressed ice to his forehead again, and gave Aang a considering look. "It will be a long flight."

"Kind of more a bunch of long flights," Aang grinned. "Katara's got this awesome idea for ice ramps!"

It was a good idea, and Katara was glad she'd had it. Aang was a master airbender, but even the Avatar had to rest sometimes. Bending up an ice ramp to land on and take off from solved a lot of problems.

Only if those problems hadn't been solved, maybe Aang wouldn't be doing this...

"Still. You will have long hours alone, under the summer sky," Shiyu said thoughtfully. "It will be an excellent time to meditate on sunlight."

"Meditating?" Aang's face fell a little, then brightened. "Oh yeah; practicing firebending will be great! Out over the ocean, nothing to burn; I can throw sparks, and swoosh some fire-"

Shiyu cleared his throat. "A certain firebender informed me that airstaffs are well waterproofed, specifically to allow flight in storms. So are sky bison, by virtue of their thick fur."

Aang blinked at him. "Um... yeah?"

"And both fur and waterproofed fabric," Shiyu went on, inevitable as lava, "are *highly flammable*."

The deck was quiet, except for the slap of waves.

"Meditating. Right." Aang scratched the back of his head, and smiled sheepishly. "Omm..."

"I don't care what Uncle says. This can't be a spirit-tale." *Draw. Part into ready stance. Stab. Retreat to guard.* "Meditating doesn't solve my problems."

Browsing on some bluebriar shoots up the hill, Asahi snorted.

Spiral. Outward block up, inward block down. Working through the dao forms, Zuko could picture the sword and spear he'd strike aside, leaving both foes open to attack or retreat.

He didn't want to retreat.

"It's *Uncle*. We've got enough problems with the whole world trying to kill us. Why do I have to have a problem with Uncle?"

Slide in. Right hilt to the Fourth Door of the Soul. Left slash down, across the Eleventh Door.

Most male opponents - and the female ones with sense - protected the groin. Beyond the obvious potential for pain, the likelihood of a quick death from blood loss was enough to sober any soldier. But if you smashed a hilt into someone's throat first, they were a little too busy trying to breathe to worry about that second blade slipping in.

"Okay, maybe it's not the *whole* world trying to kill us." Zuko sighed, stepping back into guard. "But I promised to protect my people. These people. Here. I sent out warnings, I helped the Avatar get Fire Sage Shiyu, and we helped Teo and his people get prepared to survive if everything goes wrong. Every other resource I have, I need to use to protect *right here*. I'm the great name of Dragons' Wings, and they're counting on me to do my duty." He puffed out steam. "And when it comes to the spirits, it's my duty as a yāorén to handle what the Avatar can't. Aang's busy. Asagitatsu's my problem. Why doesn't Uncle understand that?"

Asahi scratched at the turf, and gave him a sidelong look.

"Why doesn't he understand that?" Zuko asked himself, more quietly. Because this was hard to think about; he didn't want to be at odds with Uncle Iroh...

But he was. This time it'd only been inviting a bunch of waterbenders in without asking-

Only. That's kind of like only dropping the Rough Rhinos into the middle of Ba Sing Se.

Still. That was all that had happened *this* time. What about next time?

With Uncle, there's always a next time.

The worst of it was, he didn't understand why.

We got out of the Avatar-chasing business due to a sudden case of not wanting to be dead, Zuko

thought, pacing forward and back in stance. *Or in Azula's hands. Kind of the same thing at the time. Uncle was for that because he wants the world back in balance more than he wants to be Fire Lord. We hid out in Ba Sing Se to figure out what to do next... more like, I was trying to figure out what to do next, he was just as happy making tea. But I thought he agreed with me, when we were planning out this settlement. If we couldn't fix the world by ourselves, then we could at least patch up some of the cracks. That's a solid goal. That's a good goal. Damn it, I'm not a Pai Sho player; I can't go in for all the tiles when the other guy's got the whole field in his grasp-*

Pai Sho.

He could see the tiles fall into place on the board, an arcing pattern that unlocked secrets... and for some, victory.

The Lotus Gambit. A risky move that requires trying to encompass every quadrant of the field.

Uncle was the Grand Master of the White Lotus. He wanted to save the entire world.

I can't.

Asahi whickered at him, tearing apart a leafhopper she'd munched up with the vine tips.

"I can't think about the world." Zuko sheathed his dao; no sense waving around sharp metal when he'd finally put his finger on the problem. "He does, and I can't. This... is not good."

One step at a time. He'd found the problem. What to do about it would take a lot more thought.

"Don't teach when you're angry," Zuko muttered to himself, and reached out to scratch black feathers. That, both Tenzin and Uncle agreed on. And he wasn't angry now. Tired, and a little frustrated, but not angry.

Now, I can teach. Zuko grinned. And reminded himself to stop smirking before he went too far. For some reason, Jinpei got suspicious when his teacher was too happy.

Can't imagine why. It's not like we have a shortage of leaves to practice with...

Bending the storm was like riding Omashu's mail chutes, Aang thought. Exciting. Terrifying. With an awesome guilty rush of *maybe I shouldn't be doing this.*

Part of the scariness was how the winds over the ocean seemed to know what he had in mind. They knotted together faster than he could have imagined, wind and water and stored heat from the sun churning into high, koala-wool fluffy clouds; thickening further into gray, then near-black, lit inside with spiderweb-scrawks of sky-lightning. The wind carrying him almost stilled. Shuddered, and blew more fiercely, twisting him east and west in the sky.

Time to go.

He banked west and north, blanking his mind into meditation to ignore some of the strain in his arms. Even if Ozai knew enough about the winds to move fast, it'd still take the fleet and the storm some time to cross paths. Time to be in the silence, and the wind, and the...

Now.

"The problem with General Iroh," Shirong leaned back against a boulder, helping Amaya and

Tingzhe keep watch over their respective kin, "is he loves playing Pai Sho with other people's money."

Is he breathing right? Amaya worried, watching Zuko guide Jinhai through punching a small fireball. *He'd tell me if he weren't, he's learned enough healing to know not to be stupid. And if I remind him he has to be able to fight, he'll behave and let me check him. I hope.* "That is my husband you're talking about, young man," she reminded him. "He's never gambled without a very good reason. Even for money."

"I'm sure he does have reasons," the Dai Li said dryly. "I've watched him work. Your husband *is* a good man." He cleared his throat. "But I think the general has a few bad habits."

"Prince Iroh is a good man," Tingzhe said firmly. "However, for most of his life he has been *General* Iroh. And generals have different responsibilities than princes, or kings, or even a young great name."

Amaya gave him a deliberate look. Tingzhe Wen had learned to weigh his words under the Dai Li's watchful eyes, and even now he had the distracted air of a man too lost in dusty tomes to consider any possible offense given from what was just a *theoretical scenario*, certainly...

Part of her wanted to shake him until his glasses fell off. They were friends, not just patient and healer, and this was her husband and nephew about to be caught at odds with each other.

Then again, this *was* her family on a slow boil. Safe enough at the moment, but a pair of master firebenders could explode as violently as Asagitatsu if things went wrong. Add in her own temper to the mix, and the fact that Zuko was *also* a waterbender, meaning any family fight might spread outside their own walls if they weren't careful... Perhaps the distracted professor was the one she wanted to hear, after all. "How are they different?" Amaya asked. "They're all responsible for their people."

"Ah. Yes, and... no. Not exactly." Tingzhe raised a thoughtful, lecturing hand. "You're familiar with chieftains, and the Earth King; with the City Guard, and *Suzuran*, and... hmm, I hadn't considered that before, a captain like Jee *is* 'master after Agni' on his ship, which is a bit more like your chieftains-"

Shirong coughed. Deliberately.

"Ah, yes; where was I?" Tingzhe polished his glasses on his sleeve, then set them back on his nose with a chuckle. "Well. There are many kinds of generals. Foolish ones, such as General Gang; blind ones, such as the late and rather less than lamented Fong. By what reports I did manage to lay hands on from outside the Wall, General Iroh was quite different from those gentlemen. He was a good man, a good soldier, loved and followed by all his men with willing loyalty. But he was, nonetheless, a general. And all generals have one thing in common. With *very* rare exceptions, when they decide to take an objective... they don't pay the price."

"Take an objective," Amaya repeated. The phrase chilled her, with its echoes of war and death and blood. She'd seen enough death in this war already. The thought that more was coming made her want to howl her grief to the moon. Why did the Fire Lord have to come *here*?

Because we are here, she told herself, sad and proud. *Because we defy him. And Ozai's plan will not allow that defiance to exist in this world.*

Well. They'd just have to see who'd planned better, wouldn't they?

"Indeed," Tingzhe nodded. "For while the duty of a lord is to govern his people well, the duty of a general is to carry out his king's commands. He must not *waste* lives. A good general, I'm told, hoards his men like jade, while he spills his enemies' blood like water. But his duty is *not* to save lives." He sighed. "It is to spend them as he must, to achieve his grand strategy, and send his enemy down to final defeat."

Amaya shifted her weight from foot to foot, watching for any betraying hesitation in Zuko's breath. Amak seemed to be a well-trained healer, but she hadn't been there to haul her nephew out of the water and see all of the sea was properly bent out of his lungs. She couldn't help but worry. "You believe Iroh's grand strategy is to defeat Ozai, not just ward him off?" She grimaced. "He may have a point, even if it means weakening Zuko's authority. If Avatar Aang can't face the Fire Lord and kill him, and for all his power the Avatar is a *child*... someone has to do it."

Shirong reached up absently, as if to tug down a missing hat. "I wish his goal were that modest, Healer."

Sparks flew, and Amaya drew a sharp breath. She rolled her shoulders, and made herself relax again; Jinhai had managed to bend it all back into the training circle, even if the last half-dozen had wobbled in just over the edge. Zuko crouched down to look at exactly where they'd landed, sketching out with hands and words where Jinhai's form had faltered. "I'm just a backwater Northern Tribe healer, true," Amaya said dryly. "What greater goal is there than defeating the Fire Lord?"

"Restoring the balance of the world itself."

Amaya's gaze flicked to him, startled. Surely he had to be joking.

But Shirong's answering stare was as starkly serious as she'd ever seen it. And Tingzhe added a reluctant nod of agreement.

"But we can't," Amaya protested, stunned. "We're just one small tribe. There aren't enough of us to fix the world, even if we tried. And that would be assuming the rest of the world would ever listen to a bunch of sun-struck lunatics who've abandoned all propriety to live with other nations. If I didn't know better, I'd assume we'd all fallen prey to midnight sun madness." She spread her hands, tracing the shape of the caldera. "Keeping Asagitatsu calm and the drowned contained takes all the time we can spare from surviving. We might manage a short battle with the Fire Lord, but if any of us were lost, none of us might survive..."

There. There was the problem. Not one she'd expected in a husband so wise to the ways of war. "But he doesn't think he can lose," Amaya concluded, looking aside.

"Are you sure it's that innocent?" Shirong's gaze slid aside to study the shadows with her. "I saw Long Feng work."

"Iroh's not Long Feng." Amaya gave him a level look. "He'll always be a charming rogue, and more than a bit sly, but he doesn't pull strings from the shadows." She sighed. "He just doesn't see it's time to stop pulling."

"Speaking as a father, I can attest it is a bit difficult to be certain when to let your children decide to stand in the path of an avalanche." Tingzhe folded his hands in his sleeves, watching Jinhai gnaw his lip as Zuko explained again what his root was, and why not to break it unless he had to. "The prince has been in a great deal of danger for a very long time. It can't be easy to stand back and let him juggle all our fractious people, airbenders, the drowned, *and* a volcano. On top of that," Tingzhe cleared his throat, "Zuko has a temper."

"Firebender," Shirong chuckled. "Dragon-child. Take your pick."

"Oh, I do know," the professor said dryly. "Min has more than enough of his own, even when he's solidly rooted in earth. But that temper can make it a bit difficult to distinguish *no, I don't want to* and *you can't make me*, from *no, I've thought this through and I will not allow this to happen*."

Shirong groaned, and thumped his head against the rock. "If Iroh wants to bring the world back into balance, he has to work with the Avatar."

"And Zuko is shunning him," Tingzhe nodded. "*Obviously* a hasty, reckless decision, by a young man who deliberately tells the spirits to get lost at every opportunity."

Amaya winced. Young men usually didn't have the authority to banish someone from the tribe, but Zuko was of age to do it if there were no other warriors present. "He is a yāorén," she noted. "I thought it was his duty to tell some spirits to get lost."

"It *is*. Even more than a Dai Li's," Shirong grumbled. "And what part of *lethal airbending strike* did Iroh miss?"

"Ah. But to you, Zuko is a recruit. Your charge, even now, and your responsibility to rescue from spirits he hasn't a prayer of fighting on his own. Not an heir of Sozin, whose duty is to shoulder the ire of the entire world." Tingzhe gave him a look askance. "Given your encounter with the *xiāo yāo jīng*, you know how badly a new recruit can fumble a desperate situation. But," he raised a finger for a moment more, when Shirong would have protested, "you *also* know how you moved past that error, and learned caution. And you've seen your own recruits gain the skill and experience to be trusted in the field, even with your own safety. True?"

"Some do," Shirong nodded. "I think Min will get there. Eventually."

"Yet you would trust Zuko at your back against the most dire spirit that took it into its mind to strike out at the living." Tingzhe shifted his gaze to Amaya. "Just as you would trust him with lives in his hands. Because he is a trained healer, and a trained yāorén. As much as anyone can be trained for that, when no living yāorén has walked this world in a thousand years." The professor wove his fingers together, and studied the backs of his knuckles as if they held the secrets of the ages. "But Zuko is not a trained general."

Which made no sense. "He was on that ship with Iroh for three years," Amaya objected.

"And evidently that was not nearly long enough." Tingzhe glanced back up at her. "After all, a properly trained general would seize the opportunity to obtain all his objectives in one fell swoop."

"Risk it all to win it all." Amaya felt faint, and knuckled a pressure point behind her ear to steady herself. "We *can't*."

"More to the point, the *lord of Dragons' Wings* can't," Tingzhe agreed. "He is bound by loyalty, by family, and by oath to look to us *first*." He sighed. "If General Iroh cannot accept that... whatever plan the Avatar has to defeat Ozai's invasion, I pray he succeeds. For all our sakes."

I wonder if Avatar Yangchen ever fought like this?

Rain running cold over his arrows, Aang puffed out his cheeks to blow a wind that would carry him up and over the nearest war balloon, and hoped she hadn't. Because that would mean Yangchen had been fighting alone, with no one to fly with her, and... he really hoped she hadn't had to fight alone. It was awful.

You saw Katara do this. It works.

Aang scooped the water off himself with one hand, trusting the wind to hold him against his glider. A flick of his wrist, and water slashed through red fabric like a storm of razors.

Hot air gushed out as he grabbed the glider again; smoky, and a little smelly, like a platypus-bear that'd had too much cabbage. The metal rib-work groaned, airbag crumpling as the hull dropped like a stone toward the deadly waves below.

So far to fall... don't think about it.

No time to think. Monk Gyatso had taught him a lot about gliding, but nothing about how to keep an even keel with a spiral of water winding down his arm, and *eeep-*

A fireball whooshed past, missing green paper by inches.

Yanking the water back to settle as a cold glob along his shoulders, Aang spun up an airball and sent it whirling that direction with the push of a hand. More fireballs went sailing awry, whirled away from their target; some buffeted upward to impact as ashy spots on red fabric. None of them caught, the rain slanting out of the wind was too heavy for that, but the charred spots rippled ominously.

Hey. It's fire, yeah - but waterbending is getting your enemy's force turned against him. I can do that!

This was going to be tricky. Making that many airballs, while he was trying to hang onto his glider?

Who said I needed to hang on?

Grinning, Aang flipped over, and spun air between his hands. The staff pressed hard against his shoulders, the wings really weren't designed to fly upside-down...

But I only need a minute.

It was kind of like air-juggling, or snaring a dozen butterflies. He didn't need big winds. He had plenty of those already. He just needed little whirls of *contrary* wind.

Well, that and some fireballs... here they come!

Aang spun back upright, tossing the airballs with his glider wings like Haru and his dad had tossed bits of coal. The swarm of fireballs whirled like dust in a gale, spiraling up and away to hiss out in falling rain or burn dark spots of weakness in wet red cloth.

Yeah. I can do this!

-And it felt awful to be so glad about that. But he'd seen the Invasion of the North. He'd known what they were going to do to the Northern Water Tribe. And he *still* wasn't going to let that happen.

It's still wrong. It's just wrong to hurt people. And it's worse than wrong to want to.

He really, really hoped there weren't any ships on the ocean under this storm.

Except there would be, at least Ozai's supply ships, and maybe fishermen like that old geezer he'd rescued with Sokka...

I'm not running away. Not this time.

Aang pulled the glider up and caught an updraft, heading for thinner air. Slicing open the war balloons worked. That was all he was going to think about.

Maybe... maybe I don't have to take them all down. Zhao's fleet ran after his ship got slashed; maybe if I can just find Ozai's war balloon... only which one is his?

Well. The one with the fancy gilded bits kind of looked like a good bet.

Okay. One set of water-razors, coming up-

There was something dark moving under the war balloon.

For a moment all Aang could think was maybe he really *had* gotten lucky, that some of the quivery weirdness he'd felt in the storm had pulled together into spirits after the invasion fleet; nobody was *supposed* to be up in the air but sky bison and birds, and maybe he could just fly off and let a flurry of the hail-slick sickle-weasels Master Gyatso had told shivery stories about do what they did best...

Dark hair, and red robes iced with rain, and pale gold that stabbed through thin air.

...Why did he come out of the cabin?

Water-blades seemed to shiver out of Aang's grasp, slanting away in the hail and wind and rain. He had to bend them *back-*

Lightning boomed, and he flinched, banking up and away from where he'd meant to fly. Which... okay, not *good*, he was aiming away from Ozai's war balloon and sailing up behind another. He'd have to turn and fight the wind and go back, and he knew he had to, he knew it, but he *didn't want to*.

I know those eyes but Zuko's got a scar but Sozin had those eyes too, and he just left Roku there, he let his best friend die on purpose, I have to remember that. I have to... I have to...

"Decide where you stand, Aang. And stand."

Aang swallowed, queasy in a way twirling through the air never made him feel. *I have to stop the Fire Lord. But... I can't do this.*

He had to find another way. He didn't *have* to kill anybody, after all. He just had to stop the war balloons from getting to the North Pole. Maybe... maybe if he iced the tops, made them heavy enough they had to go down, out of the high wind-road-

The back of his neck prickled.

Like Azula - but he can't see me, I'm behind one of his ships-!

Light and darkness and *roaring*.

Smoke in his nose. Burning wood, crumbling to ash in his hands.

Red fabric seared to black in an instant, red-hot steel screeching as it came apart, dropping the fragments of a war balloon like metal hail.

He hit his own ship to get me?

Everything convulsed, muscles twisting until he thought his neck would break. The sky flipped upside-down, water was flying toward him-

It's not black.

Water borrowed colors from the sky above it. The sea should be a dark mass of hungry waves, scrawled on by white lightning...

And it was. But down, deep down, were translucent shapes of misty gray, streaming glimmers of blue light like strangling kelp. He knew those shapes. Only they shouldn't have been faded. They should have been hard lines of steel and iron, touched with black and flying streamers of red.

The largest had a diagonal gash, right to left; as if a massive blade had slashed the command area off in one careless blow.

A blade, or a waterbender... wasn't that Zhao's...

He couldn't *think*.

Lightning. Why is it always lightning?

He twitched a finger, and the sea swallowed him.

Chapter End Notes

Whoof. Aang POV - well, let's just say I find it very alien trying to write an avowed pacifist. Hope this worked.

Okay, apparently "Invincible" is by Hedley, and "I Wish I had an Angel" by Nightwish. I can remember odd facts about the ecology of lizard-dispersed fruiting plants, but not song titles and bands. Go figure.

If you really want angst, take another look. Because there's one big mistake Zuko's been making all along, and it's about to bite hard...

Chapter 84

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"It doesn't burn." Huojin waved a lantern through the column of warm vapor, looking even more dubious now than he had the first time. The lantern flickered, almost going out. "This is supposed to be venting pressure off Asagitatsu. Kai swears there should be some natural gas coming up in these fumes."

The elderly earthbender in charge of the easterly vents nodded, bare toes twitching against the ground as he surveyed this vexing phenomenon. "The earth-channels reach down into the same core. It shouldn't be a fire-fountain, young lord, but there should be a flame."

"Couple of kids saw this wasn't burning, decided to toss stuff through it," Huojin sighed. "Started with leaves, went on to matches and candles... I've got them doing laundry now. The hard, heavy, rock-pounding stuff." He rolled his eyes. "So. Not burning. Why?" The Guard narrowed his eyes at it. "And how soon should we start running?"

"It doesn't feel like a spirit. Move back." Frowning, Zuko lit a lash of flame, and flicked it at the shimmer of air. Like the lantern, his whip dimmed. "Well, whatever's in there, we don't want to breathe it. Langxue?"

"It's some kind of air." The island-born yāorén whirled a small sphere out of the column, molding it between his hands. "Feels funny, though."

"In what way does it seem odd?"

Zuko glanced at his uncle. "I thought you were going to meet the Northern Water tribesmen when they docked." *And keep anybody from killing each other.* That was why Saoluan was down at the shore, instead of keeping an eye on her little brother. Kyoshi Island's reputation for neutrality, and then coming in on the Avatar's side, would hopefully slow down any violent reactions.

"We suspected spirits at work," Iroh said easily, studying the waver of hot gases. "They will understand."

Right. And Captain Jee was about to take up dancing with feather boas.

The skepticism must have bled through his try at polite neutrality, because Iroh smiled. "The Fire Nation may leave spirit matters in the hands of great names and Fire Sages, but the Water Tribes live closer to the will of the world. We could learn a great deal from them."

Sure we can, Zuko thought dryly. *Things like how to hide from the rest of the world for eighty years, and then get saved by a giant water monster.*

The spirit of the Moon had hid out as a *koi fish*, for Agni's sake. If she had to be scaly, couldn't she at least have picked a leopard-shark?

"So," Iroh went on, as if the thought of unescorted Northern Tribe members wasn't sending visions of watery drowned doom dancing through his head, "how is the gas odd?"

"It moves weird." Langxue reshaped his airball, frowning. "A lot of it's... well, like air. But part of it just wants to fly loose when I bend it. It's like..." He chewed his lip, as if trying to bite down to

the right words. "Like trying to bend a flooding stream full of rocks and feathers. The feathers keep drifting to the surface."

Huojin raised a startled brow. Zuko frowned. Something about that description tweaked a memory. Not one of Kuzon's; something much more recent...

Kai was looking at them all as if they'd been sun-struck. "Air isn't anything like honest earth!"

"He didn't say it was rocks," Zuko defended his fellow yāorén. "Pumice isn't the same as granite. Seawater doesn't bend the same way as a river. Grass fires are fast and cool; wood fires are hotter. Air can be different. You're a miner." Years retired to Ba Sing Se, from what Zuko knew; but no one here was really retired now. "You know about damp."

"That I do," the gnarled earthbender admitted. "That's not a calm thought, young lord. Outside the mines, air should be air. Good. Pure. Healthy to breathe."

"If this is what I suspect, it would not harm one to breathe it for a moment," Iroh stated. "Though it would be startling. Can you bend those feathers together?"

Langxue's brows drew down. His hands moved in smaller and smaller circles, until he was spinning a globe the size of a small limon. "Now what?"

"This should not be dangerous. But it is delicate work." Iroh circled a finger near the sphere, sparks crackling in its wake-

In the spinning air, sparks glowed orange-red, flecked with deepest violet.

"Ha! As I thought." Iroh let the charge fade, and nodded to Kai. "Seal this vent. We would have to tap deeper into the reservoir of natural gas to burn off fumes here, and that may be more trouble than it is worth. We do not have the resources to exploit this yet. But in time, it may bring us closer to our neighbors than we dared imagine."

Closer to...? Zuko thought back on that odd-colored spark, and half-heard conversations between refinery workers rescued from the Nara gas-fields years ago. The tsunami had done more damage than anyone expected there, given they used unique devices in that field to produce not only natural gas, but- "It's sun-damp?"

"It is, indeed." Iroh looked into the distance, calculating. "This could be of great value to us. Eventually."

"What's sun-damp?" Langxue's gaze flicked between them, wary, as he let the gas flow away.

"And is it about to jump out and eat us?" Huojin put in.

Zuko snorted, and shook his head. "Short term? It's fine. Just don't breathe it."

"And long term?" the Guard persisted.

"Ah." Iroh waved them all toward the docks, obviously planning to belatedly greet his guests. "That is where things become interesting..."

"So this is where you finally washed up." Leaning away from the table as the firebenders kept talking, Pakku eyed the young healer who'd followed in Kanna's paddle-strokes decades before. Though Amaya's trip hadn't been nearly as favored by the spirits. He could understand Kanna

taking off for the Southern Water Tribe, a bit. He'd given her his necklace despite the elders' frozen disapproval, knowing full well the waterbending masters of the tribe wanted such a talented young man settle down with a healer for a wife, so he could raise strong, waterbending sons. They'd both been such stubborn youngsters.

But Kanna wasn't a bender, and she hadn't had the patience to change their minds... or perhaps she'd just been practical enough to see the elders' brains were frozen in their ways. She'd taken a kayak and a full set of supplies, and set out southward.

That had been then. When years later Amaya had taken off rather than consider the elders' proposal on his behalf - it did make a man wonder. Kanna had at least joined their distant kin. Amaya had paddled off to the Earth Kingdom rather than be faced with his necklace. Was every woman he'd chosen to show interest in destined to never be satisfied?

At least Kanna had mellowed with time. From that fire-etched necklace at her throat, he doubted Amaya ever would. Particularly given the way she folded her hands over each other on the table, giving him a look he was accustomed to aiming at his more feckless students. "You haven't heard a word Prince Zuko said, have you?"

"There wasn't that much to hear." Pakku flicked a gaze over the younger members of his impromptu delegation; brown-tufted Tunerk closed his mouth, the young waterbender obviously thinking better of repeating any incautious statements about being grateful for fire fountains in the midst of an honest harbor. "You're planning to face an army of firebenders with only a handful of benders of your own. If the drowned in the water don't kill you, the volcano will. And if you manage to placate both of those, an army's coming to wipe out my tribe. Again. Only this time they've abandoned the sea to profane the air instead, and if they decide to wipe out Ozai's rebel son on the way-"

Zuko's good eye narrowed at him. But the youngster said nothing. Very unlike a firebender.

"-It might slow them down for a few days," Pakku went on. "So go ahead. Try to fight the Fire Lord's best forces by throwing rocks at them. I'm sure we could use a few more hours to prepare." He gave Iroh a deliberately unimpressed look. "The only thing I don't understand is this sun-damp you seem to think is so important. Ozai's fleet is - hah! - all hot air." He shrugged. "If it's wet hot air... well, that makes things simple. A few waterbenders in the right place to raise some freezing mist, and we can let the sea have them all."

That lone brow went up. Lowered again, as the young firebender glanced at his uncle; a sidelong look that might have been amused, if the situation weren't so dire.

The Grand Lotus cleared his throat. "In this case, old friend, *damp* does not mean wet. It is a vapor, much as fog or steam are. A part of air, that may indeed damp out a flame as swiftly as a glass bell."

If he hadn't been watching the boy, Pakku wouldn't have caught it. But he was, and that flinch of anger and betrayal was as visible as a drop of blood in clear water.

For once, Pakku was tempted to agree with a firebender. Old friends weren't supposed to help invade your city. Yes, by Sokka's account, Iroh had helped save the Moon Spirit, by telling Princess Yue she bore its grace and so some of its life. But Pakku couldn't shake the conviction that if General Iroh hadn't advised Zhao on how to carry out his invasion, then maybe, just perhaps...

Chief Arnook was proud, and strong. But the loss of his only daughter had torn at his soul; and the loss of his only heir made the Northern Tribe's future dangerously precarious. One lucky shot at

Arnook before he and the tribe's elders could settle on an acceptable adoptive heir, and his people would turn on each other when they most needed to fight as one.

"Sun-damp is unusual," Iroh went on; expression so mild, Pakku knew the firebender had caught his frown. "It is not poisonous, though breathing it will not sustain life. It does not burn, even though it is found in some vents of natural gas. But most important of all, it is light. Much lighter than even hot air." Iroh's brows rose. "So light, even sheathing a war balloon in ice might not sink it. So you may have a problem, old friend. The sacks of sun-damp that lift a war balloon are as vulnerable to ice as any ship's sails. But first, that ice must reach them."

Pakku opened his mouth to object... and closed it, long mustaches bristling, as he recalled the slim reports the White Lotus had had of Ozai's airships. Yes, waterbenders could fling razor ice high and far. Hundreds of feet high? Thousands? They might have a problem. "Hmph." He gave Zuko a long look, from eyes that had stared into the midnight sun. "Your father's spent years plotting to crush the world under his heel. And you think you can drag him back to earth?"

"Maybe I can't." Pale gold was colder than ice. "But I have people who trained to hit a flying target. And if the war balloons rise out of our range... then they're in Temple territory." The young man didn't blink as he turned away from Pakku, toward the crippled youngster in his odd wheeled chair. "What do you think?"

"I think I really hope Aang and everybody got to the war balloons first." Teo gripped the arms of his chair, pale but determined. "If he didn't... I want to know a lot more about sun-damp. But we already know the most important thing. What's in those balloons may be light, but it's still air."

As if that matters, Pakku almost said, *the Avatar's not-*

The Avatar wasn't the only airbender anymore.

Even more than the yāorén, that idea made his head hurt.

Pakku folded his hands together, fingers tapping against each other in calculated antagonism. "And you think you can train Earth-born mountain-clingers to shape the wind, with nothing more than old scrolls and luck."

"Guess so." Teo gripped one wheel, tilting it back a little to give Pakku a look as stubborn as Katara's before she'd done her untrained best to flatten him. "Why, are you offering anything else? Langxue's helping us out. So air and water aren't *that* far apart."

Willowbark tea. He needed some. Soon.

"I've heard you're the master of the waterspout," Zuko said dryly. "That's air and water. You probably could help them. If you felt like climbing up a mountain, instead of down into caves after a musty old archive."

"That musty old archive holds knowledge that could set the world back on the right track," Pakku stated, eyes narrowed. Did this young scamp of a firebender actually think he could prick a master's pride into *helping* his ragged band? "It lasted through one eruption. We can't count on it surviving another."

"You want to get White Lotus archives somewhere safe." Zuko flattened his hands on the table. "I agree. Losing that information once helped start this whole mess. But it is on my land, and some of my people are yāorén. Including one of the yāorén whose past life *died* to mark that cache. *I want copies.*"

"Copies? Of every document in there?" Pakku glared at him. "There's not enough time."

"Not even if we had a battalion of print-carvers ready to go," the prince agreed. "But you have time to make copies of *some* of it. Do it. And give me the name of someone who will be obligated to deliver copies of the rest, if we survive." Pale gold never wavered. "Do that, and I will have no problems with the White Lotus taking the archive into their care."

"The *name* of..." Pakku trailed off, struck by a sudden foreboding.

And the young man *was* quick, for all his stubbornness; pale gold narrowing at Pakku for just a moment, before he turned to the firebender beside him. "Uncle. Is there something I should know?"

"Oh, many things," Iroh stalled, stroking his beard.

Pakku kept his expression locked in a scowl, even when he wanted to bury his face in his hands. *He didn't know. The most powerful man in the White Lotus is sitting right beside him, and he didn't know.* Tui and La, he wanted to *frost* Iroh. *We're doomed.*

"Sir!" A runner burst in; one of the Fire sailors, from the color of his clothes. "Sky bison, headed this way!"

"What do you mean, the invasion fleet's coming right over us?"

One of these days, Sokka thought, studying a colorful layout of the northern coast plus Asagitatsus caldera and the Northern Air Temple, he *had* to find out who'd drummed it into Zuko's head to always have a map. And give them a big hug.

...Unless it was Ozai. He didn't *think* it was Ozai, sounded a little too practical for the guy who wanted to take over the whole world. But who knew?

"Okay, we're going off Aang's maps. Could be way out of date," Sokka admitted. "There was this one place with an ice spring... eh, never mind." And if Toph were here, he'd get a poke in the ribs for that. But Toph had been corralled by Katara into Fire Sage-wrangling; it'd taken all Katara's persuasion and an earthbender's stubbornness to get Shiyu to walk those last few feet into a water-healer's den. Even though he needed it. Apparently prisons weren't good for your health. And given how bad sea-sickness had hit Shiyu afterward... well, Katara wasn't going to let the chance to consult with another healer go to waste. Even if she didn't agree with Amaya about betrothal necklaces, or Fire Nation princes, or - well, much of anything. "But those maps worked for us to get all kinds of places, and if Aang's right about the winds coming from the way air just likes to move over the world, well - that shouldn't have changed much in a hundred years, right?"

"Not unless Toph got a few of her Earth Rumble buddies to pull up a new mountain chain." Suki tapped a fan she'd gotten from somewhere against the outer ring of the caldera. "He said the high wind-road cuts right across there, right?"

"More like... there. More or less." Sokka sketched the curve of up and down Aang had shown them; maybe not straight over Dragons' Wings, but Aang had said the wind-roads could be pretty wide.

For a moment, Zuko looked as though he wanted to breathe fire. But he just took a slow, deliberate breath, and kneaded the side of his temples above his scar. "...Damn."

Suki frowned at him. *He looks almost as bad as the day he shunned Aang. Though maybe a little*

less wet. "You didn't know?"

"I don't think anybody here has flown that high," Zuko said plainly. "Nobody in the Temple even knew they *could* airbend two months ago. Before that, they were gliding on the hot air from Asagitatsu's vents. The higher you go, the less lift you've got." He grimaced. "I knew you could find faster winds at altitude, but I had no idea where they went."

He stared at the map again. Suki frowned, more than willing to jump in with more questions-

Sokka shook his head. *Wait*, he mouthed.

"...Thanks. For the warning."

Sokka pushed back in his chair, keeping his face open and serious. An alliance needed honesty on both sides. After that mess with General Fong... well, he figured Zuko would listen to blunt, plain self-interest a long time before he'd believe any pretty speeches. "Hey, we're here for a reason. Make that a couple of 'em. One, Aang said he wasn't sure he knew what he was doing with the storm, and if things went a little sideways he might get blown a long way. He figured if we met up here, we'd at least have someplace safe to catch our breath. Two..." Sokka had to brace himself for this one. "If Aang's lost out there, we'd need a spirit miracle to find him. Now, this is *Aang*. We might get one. But the last time Aang went down in a storm he froze solid for a hundred years, and if the World Spirit decides it's taking another time-out - and heck, it might, we told Aang about Asagitatsu and if the Avatar State took him over it *might* figure the best thing is to just take a nap while the volcano blows its top. Forget about the rest of us; if the World Spirit thought it was that important to keep people from dying Aang would have woken up a *long* time ago..."

He had to stop. He had to not think about Mom. Because that wasn't Aang's fault, and it wasn't Zuko's fault... and it wasn't *his* fault, either.

The Fire Lord's fault? Oh yeah. Definitely. Which kind of made him look forward to this...

Or not. Not really.

"Stopping that fleet is up to us," Sokka stated. "And if we're going to stop the Fire Lord, we'd better hit him *before* the Day of the Comet."

Zuko gave him a long, cold look. "Asagitatsu's still under pressure. If firebenders fight here, if they drop bombs the way they did on your invasion fleet - the whole caldera could go off."

"Yeah," Sokka said quietly. "I know that." He had to look down at the map, matching colors and lines to the fields and houses and fish-drying sheds they'd flown over on Appa. Just the smell of salted fish had made his throat close up, it was so much like home. "I hate to say it, but you know Ozai better than any of us. If he brings a fleet over Dragons' Wings - what do you think's going to happen?"

"I think a lot of people are going to die." Zuko looked at the map again, and winced. Traced one of the caldera edges, fingers trailing up the map to the Northern Air Temple. "We have some ideas on how to take the airships down. Teo's got a few more, but they're risky. You've worked with the Mechanist's people before, and you know a lot more than I do about what an airbender can pull off and survive." He glanced up, and spread an empty hand. "Can you help them?"

Sokka tilted a raised eyebrow Suki's way. "Well, Commander? Want to meet a whole bunch of people just as crazy as Aang?" He frowned, still trying his best to look confident, suave, and debonair. "Bunch of airbenders. Doesn't quite work. Flight? Gaggle? Fluttery?"

From the way the Kyoshi Warrior covered a giggle with her hands, not quite. "Maybe we should ask them what they'd like to be called."

"Smarter than I am," Sokka said in an obvious whisper to the firebender. "Gran-Gran's *never* going to believe I got this lucky."

Which got a fan pitched over his head, but hey. He almost deserved that.

Despite himself, Zuko snickered.

"Yeah." Sokka stood, and cracked his spine back into line. "Let's do this."

"Rebels, scalawags, and the flotsam of Ba Sing Se." Pakku stepped down into the ancient archive, avoiding a moving stack of manuscripts that turned out to have a person under it. "Not exactly the people I pictured following the heir to the Dragon Throne."

"It would seem the spirits decided that the Dragon Throne will serve other purposes," Iroh acknowledged. Sighed, and gave his sour-tempered friend a look of shared amused tolerance. "Forgive my nephew. He did not take the Moon's gift well, or gracefully."

"I can't imagine why." Pakku strode between a crisscross of scroll cabinets to glare at the kadzhait's skull eye to eye socket. "He's only been told since he was ten that he'd be Fire Lord after his father. Including by you, who lived your life before Ba Sing Se as Azulon's own heir. Why in the *world* would he take that to heart?" The Water master scowled at the skull; tilting his head one way, then another, as if to test a long-dead monster's hunting instincts. "He was probably counting on the throne to save him from his insane sister."

"Sarcasm is a delicate garment, old friend." Iroh waved a dismissing hand; *let us speak of more pressing matters*. "It is appreciated by the discerning eye, yet it tears in careless company."

"Sarcasm?" Pakku didn't quite turn his back on ancient bones. "I read your letters, Iroh. I tried to be polite answering them when matters turned to your own family." He drew a breath, let it wisp away as frost. "Now, I'd say that was a mistake."

Iroh chuckled, missing the weight that would have made it look even more harmless. "You tried to be polite?"

Pakku turned from ancient ivory, and slapped one hand on a still-dusty scrollcase. "For once in your life, stop being impressed with how clever you are and open your eyes." Blue narrowed at him. "Healing may be women's work, but Yagoda consults me on some particularly tricky cases. When a young boy tells you his sister tried to smother him - Moon and Ocean, Iroh, it's possible that *his sister tried to smother him*."

Iroh held an old uncle's smile, never letting a trace of a grimace touch his face. Yes, certain members of his family were a bit less than completely sane. But how like water, to circle around the point. He waved at the shelves now growing empty. "And what has that to do with our current difficulties?"

Pakku's long mustaches flicked with an impatient huff. "What doesn't it have to do with them? I've been in our records; what few there are left from that long ago. Even the fragments make it clear the Great Spirits can't just draft another element's bender without permission. Given the odds of the Fire Lord's exiled son praying to the Moon Spirit for anything..." Pakku fixed him with a hard look. "Your nephew's not as quick as Sokka, but once he knows something's off, he seems to have a way of burning through obstacles to take it down. Sooner or later, he *will* know who gave La

permission to meddle with his spirit. I wouldn't want to be you when he does."

A chill unease crept down his spine. Iroh glanced around the archive, but Pakku had picked his moment well. All the refugees who'd volunteered to help the White Lotus clear the archives were outside taking a break for food and tea, and the only other man in earshot was Tunerk. The younger waterbender didn't look happy to be overhearing this, but he was a junior Lotus as well as one of Chief Arnook's lesser headmen. He knew when to keep silent.

Iroh cleared his throat. "I admit, our current *yāorén* seem remarkably less than pious, given how close they are to the spirits-

"Of *course* they are." Pakku lifted a scroll from yet another stack, unrolling it an inch to skim the first few lines. "Chiefs believe. A hunter out on the ice *believes*. Those of us who have lost much to the spirits... they *know*." He rerolled the ancient paper, as if careful attention to each curve of ink would save the world. "It's easy to look over the ocean from a ship's deck and say how impressive a leopard-shark is. When you're struggling in the storm waves and a shape of fins and fangs is trying to tear you apart? No." Pakku stared at ancient bones. "No, I doubt your nephew will ever believe, Iroh. Not as you do. He's lost too much. And he won't sit idly by while you push him to lose more."

Iroh flexed his toes in his boots, itching to take a threatening step forward. But, no. Those wounds were well scarred; and if sometimes Lu Ten's death ached as if it had been yesterday, still, he was a master bender. And he had long since mastered himself. "Do you say I have not lost?"

Pakku tapped his fingers on another shelf, raising bright motes of dust. "Old friend. You lost your son to humans. Sad as that is, it *happens*." He swept an ancient cobweb out of a corner of old wood, looking more weary than angry. "You taught your nephew he was born to rule. And then your prayers destroyed any chance he had, Avatar or no Avatar." He nodded toward the stairs rising out into the sun. "Now these people have chosen to follow him. They need him, Iroh. I'm the farthest thing there is from a Fire master, but your nephew's volcano isn't exactly subtle about what she wants." Long fingers traced an arc in the air, as if to encompass all of the caldera. "And you think he'll abandon them to a hungry volcano - abandon people he's *loyal* to - to pack up and sail for the North Pole, because you say so?"

Iroh straightened to his full height, abandoning charm. "We are here when the Avatar needs us. Even my stubborn nephew sees that cannot be an accident. He is a responsible young man, chosen by the spirits. He will put the world's needs first."

"Will he. As he did when he killed his insane sister rather than let her live to become Ozai's heir?" Pakku said acidly. "Because Sokka tells me he's had the chance to do just that. *Twice*. Obviously, he hasn't. He's fought her. He's stopped her. But much as it scorches me to admit it, that young man *is* a waterbender. And Azula is family." The Water master advanced on him, eyes thin slits, as if he were staring across a dazzling snowfield. "And you expect your nephew to abandon his duties to protect his own people, so he can go to the Northern Water Tribe - who know *very* well he stole Avatar Aang away while your admiral attacked our guardian spirits - and fight his father?"

Iroh coughed into his fist. "That was not *quite* the way it happened-"

"Do you think Chief Arnook cares?" Pakku shook his head, like a komodo-rhino shaking away a pesky mosquito-hornet. "He lost his daughter, Iroh. And that wound's a bit fresher than Lu Ten."

"Your chief follows the will of the spirits," Iroh said firmly.

"*Most* of the time. But Arnook's human." Pakku didn't give an inch. "One slip. One careless word of who and what your nephew is to our people, and he's in the water and drowning. He may not be

the sharpest blade in the armory but your nephew is not *stupid*."

Iroh allowed himself a glare. "The balance of the world requires-"

"Not stupid, *and* a waterbender. The day he fights his father without his own people's lives on the line is the day *I* take up lava-sculpting."

He was, Iroh decided, insulted. "Zuko is no longer loyal to Ozai," he said flatly. "He broke his loyalty to his father. It nearly cost him his life-"

"Do I need to toss you in a waterspout to wash out your ears?" Pakku crossed his arms, frost appearing where his fingers brushed his sleeves. "This isn't *about* loyalty. This is about family." The waterbender raised a white brow. "Though I wonder. You were on campaign when your brother was born; you spent most of his life burning down the Earth Kingdom. Have you ever thought of Ozai as family? Or was he just Azulon's spare, the luckless idiot who got stuck with the throne when you couldn't bear to be bothered anymore?"

For a moment, Iroh saw red. Heard a sudden silence, and tracked it to where Tunerik had ducked into a defensible corner, face pale and a waterskin in hand.

More sensible than his teacher, Iroh decided. "You go too far. Insane or not, enemy of the world or not, he is my brother."

"And he's Zuko's father." Pakku let the sneer fall away, face lined and sad. "Old friend. Take it from one who tried to teach the Avatar what not to do. There are things you can't ask of a man. Of anyone."

"There are things no human can ask, true. But Sozin's line wrought a grave injustice on the world, and Sozin's line must atone for that terrible wrong. Whatever you may think of Prince Zuko, he knows his duty." Iroh inclined his head, one old soldier to another. "And I know my nephew. This will work."

This isn't working.

Aang blinked sand out of gummy eyes, dragging in a breath that only tasted a little like sea spray. More like green trees, and hanging moss, and maybe a few birds... and oh monkey-feathers, he was glad to be breathing anything, the last time he'd gone one-on-one with lightning it'd taken Katara *and* Zuko to put him back together, and watching those two circle each other like leopard-sharks was *scary*-

Jungle. Solid ground under him. When the last thing he knew, he'd been falling out of the sky onto a sea full of ghost ships.

Where am I?

Chapter End Notes

When it comes to dealing with the spirits, the White Lotus masters and the yāorén are a bit like politicians versus beat cops. Politicians make stirring speeches, negotiate, ratify laws, etc. Cops have to deal with the squabbling neighbors, the law-breakers, and the inevitable body on the floor. And cops who deal with homicide (much less get

shot at themselves) tend to end up with a very cynical attitude.

It took me a while to figure out, but one of the things that was blocking me is the darn airships. Fortunately or not, I happened to know something about rigid airships/dirigibles/zeppelins/pick your favorite term, before I ever saw ATLA. Which means... well. Long story short?

Hot air balloon does not equal airship.

Seriously. The fuel required to keep that much regular air hot, and lift the cabin mass, and the crew, and the bombs, and fly across the sea from the Fire Nation with no apparent chances to refuel... No. Not happening. Word of God says bending is not magic. Based on the amount of sustained bending we see in canon - no. Firebenders as the fuel for a small war balloon like Zuko steals in canon? Maybe. Might work. For the rigid airships, it just won't. You need a lifting gas, lighter than air. We generally have two good candidates, hydrogen and helium.

...I think we can all agree that gas bags full of hydrogen and cabins full of firebenders are a *bad idea*.

Believe it or not, helium is an option.

For over a century, we've extracted helium from natural gas wells using a series of techniques including fractional distillation (low temps and high pressures) and running the end result through activated charcoal.

Fire-breathing statues in town squares? Natural gas, check.

Coolers in Boiling Rock? Refrigeration and therefore low temps, check.

Coal-powered warships? Ability to create boilers capable of maintaining high pressures, check.

Activated charcoal... heck, if you can make steel, you've got this down.

So. It probably wouldn't be industrial-grade 99.9% pure helium like we use today. But pure enough to give good lift, yes. The main trick would be identifying helium as a separate gas in the first place. We first found it by examining spectral lines, studying the sun. In the Avatar 'verse... the characteristic that makes helium good for airships is the very thing firebenders would be able to latch onto to identify it. It'd be the parts of the gas vent that don't burn.

...Unless you're in the heart of a star, and I think we all agree firebenders aren't doing fusion. Or Azula would be even scarier.

Given all of the above, and a few firebenders with enough curiosity and time - yes. The Fire Nation could figure out helium as a separate, and very weird, gas. And they probably have been working on it for years. As Kryal pointed out, there is no plausible way you could make the jump from "can't make a hot air balloon work" in winter to "long-range working rigid airships" in that following summer.

Of course, airships brings home the "Fire Nation are Germany expies" idea even more, given bombs from airships launched a London Blitz most of us have probably never heard of... starting in January 1915, WWI.

Some books of interest:

Dr. Eckener's Dream Machine: The Great Zeppelin and the Dawn of Air Travel, by Douglas Botting.

Sky Ships: A History of the Airship in the United States Navy, by William F. Althoff.
Zeppelin! Germany and the Airship, 1900-1939, by Guillame de Syon.

Steampunk fans, write your congressman. Save the Strategic Helium Reserve!

Chapter 85

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"I am in so much trouble." Aang groaned, rubbing at his sore arrow. Although it was more like sore *everything*. He didn't feel as bad as he had after Azula had zapped him; nothing had *ever* felt as bad as waking up after Azula's lightning. But every once in a while his muscles just seemed to want to twitch, like the sneakiest all-over case of the hiccups ever.

Which kind of made sense. Master Gyatso had told him hiccups happened when the muscles in your diaphragm got into an argument with your brain about when you were supposed to be breathing. And sometimes the only way to get them both to agree was to hold your breath as long as you could, so both sides got the idea they were supposed to *quit it already*-

Aang thumped the back of his head against a mossy tree, startled. "A hundred years without the Avatar. I was in the ice. I wasn't... breathing."

Weird thought. Crazy as Bumi. But if Master Gyatso and Guru Pathik and everybody were right, and the four nations were supposed to be balanced - the Fire Nation trying to take over the world was one *big* hiccup.

"Well, if holding your breath doesn't work," Aang grumbled, "next thing to try is one *big* scare-"

No. No, I've got to stop kidding myself.

"I'm not just blasting away war balloons." Aang hugged himself, vaguely wondering why his clothes weren't all scratchy. Dry, he could understand; he'd hit the water, but he was out of it now. And... well, who knew how long he'd been *out* of it, period. Plenty of time to dry out. But why weren't his clothes all salty?

And... that was avoiding the hard part. Again.

Aang took a deep breath, and tried again. "If I was just blasting war balloons, then... then Ozai wouldn't have stopped me. Because... if it was just balloons, then he wouldn't have been *there*..."

There are people on those balloons.

And he had to accept that. He had to remember that. Because Air was about truth. A bender had to know why he was bending, if he wanted the wind to answer. And if he tried to tell himself he was just blasting balloons, he was *lying*.

...Which made him want to shiver and shake, even in air rainforest-warm. Air Monks weren't supposed to lie. It shouldn't be possible.

But I did. Even for just a little while, I did. And that was... awful.

Almost as awful as the truth. He couldn't stop the balloons without killing the people. Maybe the Avatar was supposed to be detached, but he was a master airbender *first*, and bending the wind to take down those balloons was tricky bending to start with, and any bending just got harder when it was tangled up with your emotions. And there was no way bending the wind to take the fleet down wasn't going to make him a shaking mess, because he didn't want to kill those people. Even if they were part of the Fire Army. Even if they wanted to melt the whole North Pole. He wanted to *stop*

them. But he didn't want to kill them. He didn't want to kill *anybody*. Not even Ozai.

And the thought that the only way he could stop Ozai was to kill a whole balloon crew, people who might be like Zuko before Toph had dragged him off on an adventure, maybe even some firebender who might not be a *good* guy but maybe thought he was doing the right thing... it just made him sick.

It's wrong. It's just - all wrong.

And it wasn't *fair*. His nightmares had always had Ozai as... well, kind of a festival play monster. Bandy legs and beady eyes in a beard, with fire all over the place. Not a real person at all. Not a man, like Zhao or Long Feng or even the mayor of Chin Village. Not even a crazy person like Azula; maybe she was spooky and awful and evil, but if Ozai was her teacher then she was doing what her teacher wanted. And... Aang kind of understood that. A little.

Funny. He knew Ozai had taught Azula. But somehow, his nightmares had never zapped him with lightning.

"Maybe that's 'cause I can't *remember* the lightning," Aang muttered to himself. "I know she did it, I kind of sorta remember her with sparks all around her - but I can't remember it. It was just Ba Sing Se and then the beach and... *gah*." He thumped his head back against the trunk again. "Monkey-feathers. No wonder Toph got so *grr argh* trying to teach me. I can't even stay on one track when I'm *trying*."

And the track was that Ozai was a person. Just like everybody else.

...Okay, maybe not just like everybody else. Normal people didn't hit their own soldiers with lightning to get an enemy.

Aang shuddered, remembering the chaos of the Earth Army after Iroh had zapped General Gang. Remembering the smell; seared meat and ozone and death. Iroh had taken out a whole bunch of Earth Kingdom soldiers to make sure he got Gang. And Iroh was one of the good guys. Mostly.

Ozai... really wasn't a good guy. Which meant - Aang shivered just thinking about it - maybe he didn't care how many of his own guys he fried. Just as long as he got the one he was aiming for.

Me.

He really didn't want to think about that. He'd never wanted to be the Avatar. It wasn't right for someone to try to kill him because - well, not because of anything he'd done. Just because he was *there*.

Aang laced his fingers together, hands gripping his thoughts before they could slip again. Because it was just so easy, so Air, to slip away from an awful here-and-now to a better future. A future where everything had been fixed. Where it was fair.

"But I'm the Avatar." Aang watched his knuckles pale. "If I have to balance the elements, then I can't just have the future. I have to have the past, and what didn't happen, and *now*."

And part of now was - he couldn't look Ozai in the eye and kill him. He *couldn't*.

"It doesn't even make sense to try!" Aang flung up his hands, thoroughly frustrated with the world, the spirits, and everybody who'd waited a hundred years for the Avatar rather than fix their own problems. Because the Fire Lord *wasn't* a spirit problem. He was a human problem. The only spirits in this mess right now were local ones like Hei Bai and the Painted Lady; spirits who were

ticked off because their little patch of the world wasn't right. Agni and Yue and the other Great Spirits - they were just pulling strings in the shadows. Like puppet masters, letting their human dolls take all the risks and the pain... and oh, he was *so* messed up if he was comparing the Great Spirits to someone as dark as Hama-

Someone like Koh?

Aang smacked himself in the forehead, wishing Sokka was here to do it for him. Wishing *anyone* was here to do it. "Argh! How can I figure out whose butt I *really* ought to kick when I can't even figure out where I *am*?"

Well, that was something he ought to be able to fix. Maybe his glider was a charred mess somewhere, but he could still climb.

Look out birds, here I come!

Three branch-dodges and a mouthful of leaves later, he was swaying at the top of a tree. Okay, jungle, more jungle, ocean, and it was kind of weird to see jungle wherever he'd washed up, he'd swear he was farther north than that-

Wait. Those waves didn't look right.

Aang frowned, squinting at the sun-dazzled water. The waves just didn't *look* like water against a shore. More like the way water had splashed together behind the big Fire Nation ship he'd been on with Hakoda and everybody, he hoped Hakoda had made it to the North Pole okay, he *missed* them...

I'm on an island. Islands don't move. What the heck?

Maybe he'd hit his head when he got zapped? He did feel sore. Even if he didn't feel any sorer on his head than anywhere else.

Aang rubbed it to be sure, and shook his head. Nothing seemed to slosh around, he wasn't dizzy. He didn't *think* he'd hit his head.

But how can an island be moving?

Frowning, Aang skidded back down the tree trunk to thump his toes against the ground. "Duh. If there's an earthbender around here somewhere, they could do it. They'd have to be as good as Toph, but - hey! Maybe the guys found me-"

The ground didn't feel right.

Curious, Aang widened his stance. Closed his eyes, and stomped his foot, *listening*.

Roots and earth and... *not* earth. Not anything like rock. Or metal, or ice, or anything that would bend.

"If it's not rock, then... maybe it really is moving," Aang muttered.

Which meant whatever he was on, it wasn't an island. So what was it?

"One way to find out." He pointed himself toward the ocean, and started running.

Splash.

And *ack*. The water was just as cold as it should be, if he was still near where he'd hit the ocean. So why was the air tropical above the shore-?

Something huge swooshed past him, black and rugged as a wall of lava. The current tossed him easily as a waterfall would a stray leaf, twisting down and down into dark water...

Use the twist. Work with the water!

Aang spun himself in the current, spiraling back up to the surface like a reverse whirlpool. Coughing, he tread water. "Whoof, that was close- ah!"

The current yanked at him again. Aang pulled a layer of ice under him, and ran for it.

Back on the shore, Aang squinted at the pattern of waves. The ones over here seemed to match that weird current, a steady rhythm that fit that moving wall, regular as oars, or fins...

No way.

He'd seen the statues. And sketches in Wan Shi Tong's library. But no one had ever seen a live one. Not in a thousand years.

Not since Avatar Yangchen died.

Airbenders from an Earth village. Waterbenders on Kyoshi Island. Firebenders hiding in Ba Sing Se. Just because he couldn't see it, didn't mean it wasn't there.

There was a warm feeling in his chest. Something Aang hadn't felt in months. Something he'd left on a terrible shore near Ba Sing Se, and never quite picked up again.

Ice-surfing halfway around the island, Aang dove into cold waves.

The water was faintly milky, little creatures scattering light to cast the massive form he sought in darkest shadow. But Aang felt the maelstrom of a slow blink, saw enormous amber eyes fix on him-

Bigger than the *Wani*, a webbed claw lifted him toward the light.

Aang breathed in as they breached the surface, watching torrents of seawater run from the edge of a shell like waterfalls. "Um. Hi?"

"Little brother." The Lion-Turtle's voice thrummed through his bones like thunder. "It has been a long time... since another bender sought my counsel."

"I could use anybody's help right now," Aang admitted. "But I'm not really your little brother." Er. As far as he knew, anyway. "Am I?"

"You bear within you the Spirit of the World. My kind were its first mortal children. So we are kin."

"Wow. You're that old?" Aang looked at the waves still foaming under them; evidently the Lion-Turtle had no problem swimming with just three feet. "I guess you saw this whole mess get started, huh?"

"Hmm." A few ponderous strokes. "I saw Avatar Kesuk fall. Some might say that was the beginning."

"...Really, really old," Aang managed. "You were there? What *happened*?"

Two strokes. Three. "The Avatar is human. And sometimes, humans go mad." A long, slow exhalation. "The Avatar is spirit. And when spirits are injured by humans... there is always a cost."

"But..." Aang swallowed. "If she went crazy... I've seen what the Avatar Spirit can do when I'm not in control of it. It's scary. It can kill people. They had to stop her!"

"There is *always* a cost." Waves and wind and silence. "Even for what is right."

Aang opened his mouth. And closed it. And felt like steam ought to be coming out of his ears. "Great. That's just *great*. And now that cost has got a whole *nation* gone crazy, and how the heck am I supposed to fight that?" He flung up his arms, automatically keeping his balance on slick scales. "Avatar Kyoshi stopped Chin the Conqueror, sure - but all she had to do was stop *Chin*. One guy. Spirits are what I'm supposed to deal with. Not Ozai. Not the Fire Nation. *Spirits*. And the balance of the world. If all the Fire Lords since Sozin have been trying to conquer the world..."

Quiet. Just the shush and hiss of water being churned by massive flipper-paws, as the Lion-Turtle waited patiently.

Aang blinked. "If all the Fire Lords since Sozin have been trying to conquer the world, then *Ozai's* not the real problem."

He could feel the Lion-Turtle's breath through his bones, like a silent earthquake.

"...I'm going to have to think about that," Aang said quietly. "But even if Ozai's not the problem... I've got to stop him from melting the Northern Water Tribe into the ocean. Or a lot of people are going to die, and *nothing's* going to get fixed."

"The Spirit of the World is a source of life." The Lion-Turtle seemed to slow, breath suddenly visible as frost as his flipper-paw lifted higher. "Find your answers here."

Wobbling, Aang stepped off onto blue ice. "Whoa, wait, *wait*, where am-?"

More blue ice rose in the distance, shaped and formed into a soaring wall. One circle centered in the highest arch, bearing the stylized waves of the Water Tribe.

"...Oh."

Zuko eyed Lt. Sadao. Whose expression was sinking fast, from eager helpfulness to about as miserable as a junior officer could get and still be alive. Took a deliberate breath, trying to enjoy the salt air on the docks rather than twitch as he watched the White Lotus pack up as much as they could of the archive onto a wooden, flammable, *breakable* Water Tribe ship. It wasn't as if Dragons' Wings' lord was lacking in other things to worry about. In the satchel he had slung over his shoulder was a whole sheaf of paperwork he was trying to commit to memory: a map of the current volcanic vents, Teo's estimates of how much pressure was left in Asagitatsu, and rough sketches of the current aerial defenses being set up. Sketches that were almost as rough as the defensive measures themselves; he knew all too well that even with Sokka cackling madly as he dove into helping bang devices together, everything they had was slapdash, makeshift, and mostly put together with a lot of string and good intentions. Just the thought of how they'd stored fire-ice underwater in stone to have it when they *needed* it had worry gnawing at Zuko's gut. Hopefully they'd designed the stone vaults to leak slowly rather than blow, and any stray gasses should just get caught up in the flames already burning over the harbor. But if Ozai's airships dropped a bomb in just the wrong place...

So Zuko sat on his temper, and picked his next words very carefully. "I'm going *where*?"

Sadao winced. "Sir..."

"Since when?"

"It was... very sudden, sir..."

"Oh, I'll just *bet* it was."

Behind the lieutenant, Seaman Saburo murmured to his hawk, and tossed her up to fly.

"Seaman?" Zuko said pointedly.

"Nothing kills sailors faster than screwed-up command chains, sir." The seaman shrugged. "Sent the captain a note that somebody slipped up."

"Somebody slipped, all right," Zuko growled. And he wanted to march onto Master Pakku's ship and straighten someone out with his bare hands...

Stop. Think. On that ship is where Uncle... no, where White Lotus General Iroh wants you. So that's the last place you want to be.

And it hurt to think that. Like saltwater on a burn. Uncle Iroh wasn't Azula.

But the situation jangled down all his nerves, and he'd have to be dead to ignore the similarities. Appeal to family. Appeal to duty. And a ship that was not and would not be under his command.

Stepping onto that deck *might* not be as stupid as running the blockade after Aang on the Solstice. But he wasn't going to count on it. "Lieutenant. General Iroh is on that ship?"

He could see the lump in Sadao's throat as the man gulped. "He was ten minutes ago, sir."

Zuko nodded once. "Convey my respects," he deliberately pitched his voice to carry, "and inform General Iroh I would like to speak to him at his earliest convenience." Thank Agni for military formalities. You could stamp down a lot of fury in icily polite language.

...Which, knowing firebenders, was probably the point.

"No need." Iroh stepped out into plain view on the deck, a gracious smile splitting his beard. "Perhaps we could discuss this over tea?"

And for one instant Zuko couldn't help but see the Fire Nation's red-and-black above Azula's ship, a so-called honor guard waiting to take them as prisoners...

Breathe. Just breathe.

He blinked, and made himself see wood, and blue pennants, and curious Water Tribe sailors finding other places on deck to be. "I don't think so," Zuko said evenly. Civil. He was going to be civil, as befit a great name. "It'd be very inconvenient if your ship should *happen* to slip its moorings while we were discussing this."

That set Iroh's teeth on edge; Zuko could see it in the slightest crease of a frown around gold eyes. "I admit, Master Pakku's ship will wish to take advantage of the tide. But surely we have time for a polite conversation."

And that politeness would drag him around and around in circles until Iroh got what he wanted. No. "You might. I don't." *Keep it civil.* "I'm not leaving."

Iroh leaned on the railing, taking a deep, patient breath. "We have discussed this."

"No, we *haven't*." *Facts. Stick to facts.* "Sokka and Aang think the invasion fleet is going to take the high wind-road-"

"Impressive as the young man is, Sokka is not trained in logistics." Iroh drummed fingers on the railing. "Onsenzakura is the closest secure colony to the Northern Water Tribe. You know yourself that the currents travel there. Those are the winds nearest the surface; those are the ones my brother and his men will know of."

Headache. He had one already. "Uncle. You don't know that."

"It is the only sensible-"

"What the hell about this *entire year* has been *sensible*?" *Damn it, keep a grip!* "You taught me to always make sure I considered every line of attack. If the invasion does go by way of Onsenzakura, and you and the other White Lotus masters head for the North Pole to fend it off - fine. You're masters. They need you. But I am *not* a master." *You drummed that into my head often enough.* "Up there I'm just one more half-trained bender. But if Sokka is right, and the fleet comes this way - Asagitsatsu's still touch and go. They need me here."

"Master Piandao has surely begun his pupil on the arts of war as well as of the sword," Iroh said patiently. "But I believe I have a bit more experience in these matters."

Which... made no sense. "Who in world has *experience* with airships?" Zuko said pointedly. "Oh, wait - that might be the people who've been *working on them* the past three years, while we were chasing a phantom no one had seen in a century?" He shook his head. "Sokka's been on that flying furball for half a year straight. When it comes to air tactics, I *think* he knows what he's talking about."

...Which was a mistake, he knew that even as he said it. Iroh straightened, and gave him the look of a disappointed teacher. "Nephew. You are well aware, amateurs study tactics. Professionals study *logistics*."

I am right, and you are the failing amateur. Agni, he'd seen that look so often.

And it was one look too many, on top of a lifetime of looks, and he just couldn't take it anymore. "You just can't let it go." Zuko's fingers curled; he barely felt nails prick his palms. "You can't believe my father found an opening that you didn't!"

"There is no opening-"

"Yes, there is! The high wind-road is up there. And if the invasion follows that road, the Fire Lord can hit three things he hates in one day! The Northern Water Tribe. The Earth Kingdom. And *me*." Breathe in. Hold, before he started firing off sparks just *because*. And out. "Screw logistics, Uncle. A chance to hit one target efficiently, versus commandeering every soldier in sight to grind *all* of your opponents into the dust one more time? *I know my family.*"

"No, you do not." Iroh shook his head, as if he couldn't even believe they were having this conversation. "You left the Fire Nation as a *child*. A child in anger and pain, long before your father could show you the depth of his knowledge. I have been there since my brother was born. I know his training. He will focus on the one target he *must* destroy to set the balance of the world

forever awry; the birthplace of the next Avatar." He thumped a fist into his palm, eyes shadowed. "But he will not prevail. We will defend the Northern Water Tribe. Sozin's line will not fail the world again!"

A child. That's all he... Zuko felt himself start to tremble. Swallowed hard, and held himself steady with all the will years of surviving had trained into him. *Don't fight fire with fire. Sidestep. Redirect.* "So repaying the damage Great-Grandfather did to the balance of the world is more important than anything else."

Iroh sighed, fingers patting the railing in relief. "I knew you would understand, nephew."

Yes. I do. And he didn't know whether to set the whole dock on fire or fold into a cold, bereft ball of misery.

Can't do either. People need me...

His *men* needed him. Men like Lt. Sadao, and Seaman Saburo, all but holding their breath as they watched this play out. Because until it did, they didn't know who to follow-

General Iroh. Interfered. With my chain of command.

Zuko focused on that, and not the cold wailing in his heart. Snapped his fingers, letting sparks cascade to the dock. "Lieutenant. See that General Iroh and his associates have all they need to depart."

In the midst of turning away, Iroh's head whipped back toward him.

"I understand," Zuko said, letting the words cut bone-deep. "I understand that even the Dragon of the West can fail to properly calculate his strategic options. Because I am *not* Lu Ten. And you are not going to *sacrifice my people* to fix the damage *you* did to the world as Azulon's general!"

Iroh's jaw worked a moment, soundless. "Zuko-"

Don't let him recover. You can't. "You think Lu Ten's death served some greater purpose. Wake up!" Zuko snarled. "The spirits *don't care* that much!"

Iroh drew a Crown Prince's dignity around him like formal robes. "You have no right to say such things!"

"You're right," Zuko said icily. "I don't. I am exiled. Outcast. *Disinherited*. Which means I am officially banned from repaying any penance Sozin might owe the spirits. Whatever I do? Even if I saved the Avatar's life? *It won't count*." He gestured at the dock, the harbor, the rough buildings behind them. "All I can do is what the spirits have left me. I am the great name of Dragons' Wings. I will *not* abandon my people."

A thread of smoke drifted from the railing. "You cannot abandon your duty to the spirits-"

"The White Lotus *does not command here*." His head hurt. His heart hurt. And he could feel the trembling in fire and waves, as Asagitsatsu sensed the threat of *leaving*. But he had to draw the line. Here. Now. He had to succeed where Azulon and Ozai had failed, and pin down the man who'd made skating out of inconvenient loyalties the center of his life.

Oh. Great. Like I'm ever going to pull that off.

But... it didn't matter if he did. So long as everyone around him knew where Iroh's loyalty *wasn't*.

"I am the Lord of Dragons' Wings," Zuko stated. "Either you are loyal to me, or you are loyal to the White Lotus. *Choose.*"

A few yards away, Captain Jee held his ground with an effort. He'd dropped down from *Suzuran's* decks to the dock as soon as he'd seen the hawk coming, he didn't need a message to read that angry set of the prince's shoulders-

I wasn't fast enough.

Then again, maybe no one could have been fast enough. The gauntlet Zuko had just thrown down - *declare your loyalty* - was the kind no one walked away from without blood, death, and fire...

Iroh was silent.

Zuko drew a sharp breath. Nodded once; a short, tight movement that had Jee biting back the foulest curses a sailor knew. He'd seen that stiffness before. If General Iroh tried to argue his case *now*, while the prince was as word-lost as a dragon-child could be-

Zuko turned on his heel, and stalked away.

Jee exhaled in pure relief. *Good. He knew he was in trouble. Now, if I can just get Teruko to sit on him until his words come back...*

Except there was a more critical problem, still standing in shock on the Northern Tribe ship's gangplank.

Bad as he looks right now, the prince will just walk it off, or finds something that needs breaking. If I let General Iroh run around loose, after he's failed to claim loyalty here...

Well. That would be bad.

Drawing himself up to his best parade stance, Jee nodded respectfully; loyal sailor of the clan, to a visiting lord. "General Iroh. If you and your allies hope to reach the Northern Water Tribe before the Comet, I think you need to leave. Now."

Waves, and the wind.

Pakku eyed the solitary figure at the railing, whom everyone else was very carefully working around. "I tried to tell you. You asked a *waterbender* to leave his tribe and fight his family-"

"...Do not speak to me."

No fool, Pakku fell silent.

Chapter End Notes

I haven't been able to track down a more technical term for it than the "Joan of Arc advantage." In short, when a new technology is introduced on the battlefield, young officers and amateurs are likely to be able to use it to walk all over experienced generals who've never used the stuff before. This was one of the reasons Joan was so

effective; cannon were a recent introduction on the battlefields of the Hundred Years War, and she used them to devastating effect.

Iroh is an experienced general. But he's an experienced general who's never used airships to fight. While Sokka has flown on Appa since the start of winter, and faced Ozai's use of airships on the Day of Black Sun. It's not only possible that Sokka has a better read on the upcoming fight than Iroh, it's *likely*.

On top of everything Iroh doesn't know about airships in combat, he's now reached the moment he's prepared himself for since he broke the siege of Ba Sing Se. Seven years of dedication, of turning the darkest day in his life into a hoped-for triumph. When something you want that badly is in your reach, you tend to lose sight of everything else; witness Zuko chasing Aang. And under stress, people tend to fall back on old habits. Unfortunately, even in canon, Iroh has a habit of manipulating Zuko for his own good. Mix that with Zuko's reflexive paranoia (if you can call it paranoia, when everything *really is* out to get you), and boom.

And there's nothing uglier than a serious fight between two people who love each other.

Chapter 86

Chapter Notes

Warning, Azula being creepifying.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"What's going on?" Suki demanded as the four of them plus one worried lemur headed down the rough road toward *Suzuran*.

"When you find out, tell me," Sokka said grimly. So far they'd heard at least six versions of what had gone down before the Northern Tribe ship had hoisted anchor. Iroh and Zuko had had a fight. Somebody'd disowned somebody else because of the waterbending - which seemed kind of unlikely given Iroh had *married* a waterbender. Some kind of evil spirit had swooped up out of the archive, turned all the people on the ship into undead pirates, and swept out to sea cackling about rum...

That old busybody, Katara had been able to set straight with a vivid description of Iroh flinging fire at Zhao's mooks at the North Pole, and a few choice words about Water Tribe pirates that had pinned the old gossip's ears back. But the simple fact she'd had to say it meant things had gone very, very wrong.

So now they were heading to get the closest thing to the truth Sokka thought they'd hear from anybody here. All the while crossing his fingers that this was the right call.

We could still head north and meet up with Dad... no. I believe in Aang. Ozai's going to hit here first.

"We could still fly out and catch Master Pakku to ask," Suki pointed out as they hurried.

"No. That wouldn't look good." Katara shook her head. "We're not just Aang's friends. People see us as speaking for the Avatar. Even when it makes no sense. Aang can tell them he disagrees with us all the time. But right now Aang's... not here. And if we're going to help him when he gets here, we need the people here to believe in him. If there was a fight - Zuko's here. He's the one we have to deal with. And everyone fights better when they trust their chief." She hesitated in her stride, casting a worried look at Toph.

"Trust him, don't trust him," the earthbender grumbled. "Make up your mind. The mountain feels twitchy, but she's not going off."

Pale as Toph was, Sokka knew she had to have been worried about the volcano finally blowing its stack. Which would suck. A lot.

But they'd hit the rock-studded mix of a dock *Suzuran* was anchored at, and there was just the guy Sokka was looking for. In full, neat uniform, speaking softly to a healer in dark green, and not looking at all like he thought the harbor might geyser up flaming lava any second now. "Captain Jee," Sokka hailed him. "We've been hearing a lot of rumors... um."

"You're not the only one." Amaya looked tired, dark circles under her eyes and a blue shawl over

her shoulders, as if she felt the breeze more keenly than they did. "Captain. Iroh swore he discussed this with my nephew."

"It's possible he may have mentioned it," Jee allowed. "In the middle of juggling logistics ledgers, Prince Zuko is likely to say *mmph* to just about anything. But I feel I must point out, milady, that Langxue is up at the Temple with the gliders, Lt. Teruko is overseeing defensive emplacements, and General Iroh timed his request for when he knew Agent Shirong would be busy coordinating the vent-bending." The captain paused, and lowered his voice. "I know the prince hates to be crowded. And here..." He gestured at a plume of flames rising from the harbor waves. "I thought it would be safe to give him some time to breathe. I'm sorry to say the general probably calculated that I'd do that."

Amaya sighed.

"So he made sure Zuko was alone. Go figure," Toph said impatiently. "What *happened*?"

"I haven't spoken to the prince directly yet." Gray brows drew down as Jee stared across the water to the harbor mouth. "He's in no shape to talk."

Amaya winced.

"But from what I did overhear, and what Lt. Sadao told me..." Jee bent his gaze on Sokka. "You believe that Fire Lord Ozai will bring the airship fleet by way of the high wind-road, and strike Dragons' Wings on his way to burn out the Northern Tribe."

"Aang showed us the map," Katara jumped in before Sokka could consider his answer. "He's a master airbender. I know he's right!"

"Prince Zuko agrees with you," Jee nodded. "Unfortunately, General Iroh doesn't." He glanced at Amaya. "To speak in the general's favor, milady, by most tactical considerations he would be right. Heading for the North Pole by way of Onsenzakura would give the Fire Lord a known and trustworthy source of supply, with a relatively short air route to the field of engagement. It makes sense. Especially if - as General Iroh appears to believe - the Fire Lord intends to wipe out the people most likely to harbor the next Avatar."

"How can you just say that, like it doesn't matter to the world that the Avatar would be..." Katara trailed off, narrowing her eyes at the firebender. "What do you mean, *if*?"

"We've all heard of the swampbenders by now," Jee shrugged. "If you think fighting on ice is bad, let me tell you, swamps are worse. Everything's wet, your armor rots off you, and there are cat-gators out to eat you every time you turn around. Unless the Fire Lord splits off a division of airships just to deal with the Foggy Swamp on the same day as the North Pole, he knows he won't get all the waterbenders. If, again, he's after the Avatar at all." Jee glanced at the *Suzuran's* moorings, as if he were completely absorbed in every twist of knotted ropes. "There's always the possibility that-"

"Don't say it!"

Sokka grimaced. "Katara. I know it's awful. And he's *tough*. But we have to..."

Katara shuddered, deliberately moving her hand away from her waterskin. "Aang's fine. He's just late."

"I hope so," Jee said quietly. "In short - if the clash of the spirits is the most important thing on Fire Lord Ozai's mind, then yes. The general is correct. His approach to the defense of the North would

be valid. But I was in command of the *Wani* when we first encountered the Avatar. I know who was sleeping, and who was burning the midnight oil trying to track down a flying foe. After what we all saw, chasing you into the heart of a hurricane - we know the winds are different high up. And Nara, where they mine sun-damp from the gas, was hit by a horrendous storm only a few years ago. They'd know it too."

Sokka raised a finger; *wait, clarify that*. "Sun-damp's that gas Teo was talking about when we went up there, right? Lighter than air... which is really, *really* weird to think about. And you *mine* it?" He grumbled something even he didn't understand under his breath. "Man, I wish we'd known that before Aang flew off. Maybe it would have helped."

"It still might." Katara had a slightly evil look on her face. "Air can have water in it. Just how damp is this sun-damp?"

"Er... what?" Jee asked warily.

"What's sun-damp do when it's full of water?" Katara clarified. "Like air in a storm?"

"I... honestly have no idea." Jee frowned. "The prince would know more, if any of us do. It *was* a secret project. Would knowing that really help?"

"Ooo yeah," Sokka muttered, thinking of the last time Katara had pulled out the ice claws. Given he'd seen her pull them out of the air, and master waterbenders like Katara could pull on water they couldn't even see - he didn't know if he should wince, or cackle like Toph in a winning match. Maybe both.

"This is going to be good." Suki shared an evil grin with Katara, before giving Jee her best warrior-leader look. "But you respect General Iroh. Why do *you* think he's wrong?"

The captain let out a slow breath, considering his answer. "The general is a very spiritual man. He's lost a great deal, and he's dedicated himself to undoing his grandfather's mistakes. He looks toward a future he never expects to live to see; the world made whole, and the Avatar returned." He paused for more thought. "Prince Zuko looks at a future he will have to live in, with the rest of us. If the prince is wrong, our absence from the North Pole will not turn the tide. If the prince is right - we will be all that stands between Ozai and Asagitsutsu."

Toph tilted her head back, almost meeting him eye to blind eye. "Shaking in your armor, huh?"

"Not as badly as I will be if the prince is right," Jee admitted. "I wish you'd left with the general, milady."

"The Northern Water Tribe has plenty of healers." Amaya crossed her arms; dark red threads glinting a pattern of thorns along her sleeves. "Iroh and I discussed this weeks ago. I won't stop him from running into a firestorm, and he won't stop me from defending my family." She drew in a shaky breath. "Though after what I felt here... I would have sworn there was a thunderstorm about to unleash hell, the water was that jittery... please tell me we have a good plan for defending the children."

"I believe we do," Jee nodded. "Though we're open to all the help we can get." He looked directly at Katara. "We had the chance to interrogate some of the surviving guards at the coal rig you infiltrated."

Katara raised her chin. "Where you were holding innocent people prisoner."

"Prisoners you managed to free, with good luck and improvisation," Jee fired back. "They'd given

up. You gave them hope and courage, and roused them to fight for what they believed. Are you willing to use that talent here? I know the prince. He doesn't want to fight his father. I know he *will*. He has to; we're here, and he won't abandon us." The firebender inclined his head to her. "But it's easier to stand fast if you know your companions will stand with you."

For once, Sokka saw his sister actually taken aback. "I don't know," Katara admitted. "I'll... need to think about that."

"You should," Amaya said soberly, drawing her shawl a little tighter. "Helping a battle-fury flow isn't something anyone wants to do lightly. Especially with what's in our waters, if the fires go out." She looked just a little rueful. "Even if I were a strong enough bender to touch so many hearts, I don't have the endurance to maintain the effort. Not now."

Katara started, with that weird adding-it-up look Sokka had last seen before he'd drifted into a feverish haze that had ended with sucking frogs. "Are you...?"

Amaya's smile looked a little tired. "We can discuss it with my scrolls, if you like. I doubt Yugoda had the time to show you some of the finer points of checking a patient."

Jee did one of the fastest double-takes Sokka had seen on a firebender yet, face going almost as gray as his hair. "Milady!"

Amaya's smile brightened. "Don't worry, Captain. I'm no youngster; I know enough not to overdo it."

"Oh, there really are fates worse than death," Jee breathed. "Excuse me, I have catapults to oil..."

"Men," Amaya chuckled, as the captain almost bolted for the gangplank.

"Squeamish," Katara agreed. And smirked at him. "I should tell her about you and the fishhooks."

"It seemed like a good idea!" Sokka glanced between them, feeling like maybe Jee had the right idea. "What are you guys talking about, anyway?"

At *guys*, both waterbenders broke out laughing again. Sokka looked at Toph and Suki, and spread empty hands. "What'd I say?"

"Got me," Suki muttered, facepaint not thick enough to hide her bewilderment.

"And you share a saddle with Sokka." Amaya got her giggles tamped down, and waved a beckoning hand. "Come along, young Warrior. I think we need to have a talk."

White face dubious, Suki followed the pair toward shore.

Sokka hung back a moment, with the only sane bender in sight. "Why do I think I'm going to regret this?"

Toph looked just as freaked out as he felt. But she cracked her neck, and gave him the Blind Bandit's grin. "I bet we both are. But I'll bet you rock candy Ozai will hate it worse."

"My father will try to destroy this place, you know. It's everything he hates."

Cloth folded over her arm, Xiu paused. Took a second look at the worn-out prince stalking along the rock ledge, and traded a questioning glance with one worried marine. Lt. Teruko shrugged, obviously less than happy. But nothing was on fire. Yet.

Why does that make me even more worried?

Well. Easy answer to that. She'd finished this last piece of work at just the wrong time, and run into Agent Shirong and the rest of the Wens just as they'd been trying to figure out who would be the best person to tell Zuko he still *had* a family. So she'd volunteered to come up here instead, because if that fight had been even half as bad as some of the ones she'd had with Grandmother, *family* would just be more salt on the wound. "If you're telling me to run while the running's good, thanks," the weaver shrugged. "But this is Fong all over again. If Asagitatsu goes up, where would I run to?"

"My uncle would say you should try." Gold eyes were haunted. "Who knows. You might get a miracle."

If his voice were any more bitter, she could have used it to tan silk. "You don't believe in miracles, do you?" Xiu said quietly. "You're the one Agni and La picked to face down spirits, and you don't believe they'd help us when we deserve it?"

"If spirits gave us what we deserved, there wouldn't be a Fire Lord." Pale gold cut at her. "Unless you think the world deserves this war."

She didn't know what to say to that. "My family would say we lost faith in the Avatar-"

"Don't. Don't do that to Aang," Zuko bit out. "He's a kid. Sometimes he's a stupid kid. But he tries, he never asked for any of this, and it is not his fault he was frozen in an iceberg for a century while the world went to hell." He knuckled the side of his brow, creasing the dark circles under his eyes. "There's plenty of stuff that is his fault. This war isn't."

And if he was thinking about that, after what everybody agreed had been a downright vicious family fight... "You think your uncle blames the Avatar for the war?"

"I think Uncle thinks he can find somebody to blame," Zuko snarled. "Because if it's somebody's fault, then everything that happens means something, and he can make it right with one heroic sacrifice-" Fists clenched, fiery daggers blazing for one brief instant. "I wish I could believe in spirit-tales. The way Uncle does. But even when he fought a haima-jiao to save Aunt Amaya, he thought that was the will of the spirits, too."

"But..." The protest died on her lips, as Xiu tried to fit together what she felt with what she knew. "The Great Spirits are different."

"The Great Spirits are more powerful." Zuko gave her a frustrated look. "That doesn't make them different. Agni favors the Fire Nation; Guanyin favors Earth. Tui and La watch out for Water. The Autumn Lord still looks after people who listen to the wind. But they're still spirits, and they want what they want. *Deserve* has nothing to do with it." His shoulders slumped. "I'm not a hero. I'm not even a good nephew. Just a great name too stubborn to lie down and die. I'm probably not even good at that, I could be wrong..."

Teruko cleared her throat.

"Well, I could be," Zuko grumbled. "I'm wrong a lot."

Aha. Here we go, Xiu thought. "So what if you are?"

Zuko's eyes were bleak as the Great Divide. "Then I left him to face Fire Lord Ozai alone."

Okay, fate worse than death. Get him thinking. "Oh, sure," Xiu said bluntly. "Alone. With all those

waterbenders up at the North Pole, including that Master Pakku. Captain Jee says the guy's known for waterspouts. And the Southern Water Tribe fleet; what's left of it, anyway. *And* all those Earth Army guys they managed to sneak out of the Fire Nation. Really, really alone." She swallowed, and got ready to duck. "And if he's wrong, then he left you alone."

"...I know."

The quiet answer prickled the hairs on the back of Xiu's neck. "You know," she echoed blankly. "But-"

"That's how it always is," Zuko said, still quiet.

Which was the *same I hurt, go figure, moving on*, she saw in the mirror. After dealing with Grandmother. "Yeah," Xiu sighed. "Fighting with family *sucks*." She shook her head, and shook out embroidered silk. No wonder the Wen family had asked for the old-fashioned firethorn design. If anybody needed protection from the sickness-spirits that snuck in when people got depressed, this prince did. "Not everybody leaves, you know. And even if you're angry at someone - that doesn't mean you don't love them." She held out the robe. "Somebody said the lord of Dragons' Wings should have some good robes. Not the ones that got hit by *lightning*."

For a moment he just blinked at her, like she'd slapped him with an ice-octopus. Shifted his shoulders, and shrugged. As if it really, *really* didn't matter. Really. "I liked those robes," Zuko grumped, reaching out to feel the thick silk. "One present, courtesy of Azula."

"Present?" Xiu choked.

"Proof I could take the toughest bending the Fire Princess could throw at me, and walk away alive," Zuko smirked at her. "That's a heck of a present."

And he's smiling? "Next time, just ask for some rock candy," Xiu managed.

"Heh." Zuko sighed, looking at least a little less like he was about to bite nails in two. "Well, at least nobody's dead yet." He stared at the horizon, as if he expected airships to sail into view on wings of thunder. "In my family, that's never a sure thing."

Mai glanced out the window of the house Ty Lee's sort-of-relatives had scrounged for them, taking in the deceptive peace of the caldera below. There was the palace, and there was the arena, and the plan Azula proposed to seize it all was enough to make her hands shake.

Deliberately, she stilled them. And held up the latest ledger. "Hostages we're returning to their families."

"Great names smart enough to see where my father is leading our nation, but not as lucky as Byakko." Seated by the wall, Azula stroked a file along her nails, honing them to a clean edge. "They won't all join us. They might never join us. But they'll know I could have taken their people by main force. And I didn't." She smiled, eyes distant with calculations of interest and influence. "If Long Feng had given the Dai Li a choice, he wouldn't have lost them."

Mai nodded, and turned the page. "Hostages we're hanging onto."

"Clan heads I wouldn't trust as far as the Avatar's pet could throw them." Azula's face darkened. "Some of them are profiting too much from a war to see any possible value in peace. Others think we can't lose. So they won't bother to plan for what happens if we can."

She just had to poke the dragon, Mai realized. She couldn't resist. "The Avatar didn't do so well the last time he was here."

"The Fire Navy didn't do so well the last time they went North," Azula shot back, eyes half-lidded with lazy amusement. "Father will win, or he'll lose. If he loses, the Fire Nation is mine by right. If he wins - the initiative I've shown in taking the capital he left *undefended* demonstrates that I am the proper heir."

Mai kept her face still, seeing that faint flash of hurt in gold eyes. "And if he decides it's not initiative, it's treachery?"

"Then we have a civil war." Azula's face went cold, and her voice had a hard edge. "Bad as that would be, it might save us all."

Mai thought that over, turning a globe of the world in her mind. "You think the Fire Nation will miss the Avatar. Again."

"I think that Admiral Zhao wasn't stupid, and my brother was more determined than Father ever admitted." Azula tapped a nail against the arm of her chair, testing the point. "Father's more likely to kill the airbender than capture him. In which case, we're likely to get a Water Tribe Avatar raining ice down on our heads. But not right away. They'll have to find her. Train her. *Mold* her. If we've torn ourselves to pieces in the meantime - the Water Tribes hate heat, and the Earth Kingdom hates water. And Water likes to see its enemies *suffer*. If the only reports they have of us are how we're killing each other, they'll stand back and let us do it." Gold eyes narrowed. "Those of us who survive will be stronger. And more... we'll know how to *wait*."

It made a vicious kind of sense. Still... "That won't stop them from sending troops in to help us kill each other off," Mai pointed out.

"Oh, I hope they try." Azula's smile could have cut glass. "There's nothing as easy to tear apart as allies who hate each other. And they *will* hate each other, Mai. Without the strength of our navy to rule the seas, pirates will spread and multiply. They'll raid and loot wherever and whoever has treasures to be stolen. Earth Kingdom, Water Tribes - by the time the next Avatar is recognized, they'll hate each other more than they could ever hate us. Let them try to meddle in our domains. They'll be double-crossing each other within days." She flexed her fingers, nails gleaming. "And if by some chance they don't... I'm sure we can find ways to make it look as though they did."

Mai almost put the ledger down. Thought better of it. "You're looking forward to this."

"I'd rather look forward to *winning*." Azula frowned. "But Zuko's a horrible liar. If he says this Face-Stealer spirit wants all humans dead, he believes it. Better a live guerilla than a dead great name." She shrugged. "And speaking of spirits..."

Mai turned another page. "Fire Sages who can be bribed or intimidated for your declaration."

"Far too many, for the health of our nation." Azula's eyes narrowed. "After we're done with them... I wonder how many we can persuade to look into reports of man-eating warehouses?"

Mai shivered. That was an old, scary legend. "Somebody's reported a man-eating warehouse?"

"Not yet."

Well. That was an answer right there.

Azula leaned back in her chair, setting her file aside as she watched Mai's reaction. "I have to

admit, I've been meaning to ask. You don't approve of all my methods, or my plans. So why are you still here?"

Now we come to it. Mai closed the ledger. "Two reasons," she said clearly. "First, after what you did to set me up with Zuko, your idea of a good boyfriend sucks. I'm going to make sure you end up with a guy who really is strong enough to be your consort." She paused, deliberately. "And who's not my brother."

Azula had drawn back on herself, fixing her with an unnerving stare. "Consort?" Lips pulled back from white teeth, before she forced them into a vicious smile. "My own mother thought I was a monster. Do you really think she'd ever want to see my children?"

"You were a monster," Mai acknowledged. "You don't have to be one now." She shrugged, thick cloth sleeves rustling as if they were innocent fabric, never giving away the senbon strapped inside. "And just because you have them, doesn't mean you have to raise them. Foster them out, with people whose loyalty you hold. That way you can do your job as the Fire Lord, then sweep in at the end of the day and terrify them into doing their homework." She let a hint of a smile glimmer on her face. "You know you'd like that."

For two slow heartbeats, Azula was silent. "Foster them. Like onmitsu."

"Why not?" Mai focused her will into keeping her voice steady. Azula was better now. More stable, and a lot more likely to think twice before she lit someone on fire. But Lady Ursa was still a delicate subject. "You shouldn't put them *with* onmitsu. They'll be strong in Fire. They'll need someone who can be loyal to them. But if you're afraid you'd hurt them-

"I would." Azula's voice was quiet, as she glanced aside. "You know I would. I hurt everything around me."

"My parents say that part of being a good governor is knowing what you can't do. Find that out, and then find people who can do it. And take them into your service to do it right." Mai inclined her head; governor's daughter to crown princess. "Have heirs to follow you. Train them. But if you think you'd hurt them," *the way you were hurt*, "then you're not a monster. A monster wouldn't care." She shrugged; Ty Lee would have bounced over and given Azula a hug, but the airbender was off helping Dai Li charm some of Azula's first cautious supporters. A friendly ear would have to do. "Loyalty. Love. They're not a fuzzy-headed idiot on the beach preening over his girlfriend. They're about giving the people important to you what they need. Give your heirs that. Tell them why later."

Azula's gaze flicked to hers, then slid aside. "What if... staying away doesn't make a difference?"

They both knew it was possible. Even likely. The line of Sozin was brilliant, ruthless, and cruel. And more than a little mad.

Mai took a deep breath, and stood straight. "Then we go kidnap a water-healer to help them," she said flatly. "Zuko told you there would always be somewhere you could go for help. Drop a coded message in the right place, and I bet he'd be willing to go missing for a few days."

"He would, wouldn't he?" Azula shook her head with fond exasperation. "You said, two reasons."

Better be honest. "I hate being bored," Mai stated. "I'd rather stare down flames than be bored. It kills me, like no wind kills Ty Lee." She raised her eyebrows. "Life around you is a lot of things, but it's never boring."

A knock at the chamber door, and Agent Bolin slipped into the room. "Princess." He offered a scroll. "Delun didn't decode it, but he says it came by way of Foggy Swamp."

"Foggy Swamp?" Mai frowned as Azula took the scroll. "We don't have agents there."

"We don't," Azula agreed, eyeing the scroll from all angles before she touched the wax. "But Grandfather does."

One sharp nail sliced away the wax. Azula unrolled the first few inches, reading-

"*Oh.*"

Cold. Not a really bad cold, not when he could move air to keep him as toasty as he wanted. But ever since he'd learned to waterbend, cold had been something Aang noticed. Like a rising thermal, or cracks in hanging stone.

He walked through snow-white Northern Tribe streets, trying not to notice how many people were looking at him. Maybe if he just kept walking, he'd get where he needed to go without people asking too many questions. Though it was going to be a couple days yet before the Comet and he could *really* use a snack-

"Avatar Aang." Chief Arnook's hair was streaked with gray that hadn't been there a few months ago. "Our coast-watchers have reported Southern Tribe boats headed for our city. What's going on?"

Fire Lord Ozai's not the real enemy. "I need to talk to your shamans," Aang said, wishing he still had an airstaff to cling to. "And then... I need to visit the Spirit Oasis."

Chapter End Notes

It's a well-known fact that abusers and violent offenders were generally abused themselves. See the evening news on any particularly gruesome crime, and sooner or later the talking heads will explore the perpetrator's "deprived childhood". What's less well-known is the facts assembled by sociologists and psychologists determined to look at all abused children, not just the ones that end up in court. What they've found, you probably won't hear on the news, because it's just not bloody enough.

About three-quarters of abuse victims go on to never abuse anyone.

Three out of four. People who come from the most horrible backgrounds, the worst traumas one human being can inflict on another. Made even more horrific because the abuse was perpetrated by people they should have trusted. And yet these survivors pick themselves up, and go on, and *refuse* to do unto others what was done unto them.

A lot of them do have problems, and they know it. While they might not go to the lengths Mai's suggesting here, getting help as a parent, if you're scared, is not a bad idea at all.

Chapter 87

"Ah; now this is what summer's supposed to be." Pakku peered through narrowed eyes at the full force of a polar sun, letting it warm him down to the bone. "I'll never get used to the hours you keep down near the equator. Day and night almost the same year-round - it's enough to drive a man to thin ice."

"Hmph."

Which was about as much response as he'd been able to get out of Iroh in days. It was starting to wear. Old, bitter, and cynical was *his* job. He'd earned it. "You're starting to make me look cheerful. Quit that."

Iroh didn't glance at him, as sailors finished tying the ship up.

Pakku sighed. "After all, if your nephew's wrong, he's safe. And your wife is safe. Which is more than I can say for most of my kin." He frowned, for once shading his eyes from the full glare of summer as they started down the gangplank. *Is that-? It is.* "Besides. From what I've seen, Prince Zuko and Avatar Aang in the same place aren't just a recipe for disaster. They're a whole kitchen with ten cookbooks and a feast getting ready."

Startled, Iroh looked.

Ha! I win.

"Master Pakku." Aang tried not to sigh in relief too obviously, as Chief Arnook nodded to the arriving masters. He wasn't surprised, exactly; he'd already run into Jeong Jeong and Master Piandao and Bumi of all people, who'd just cackled at him and said there *was* dirt under some of the snow. You just had to dig for it. Oh, and Fire Sage Shiyu. Poor guy. Chief Hakoda said he'd had an *awful* trip. "General Iroh. Boy, am I glad you're here. Sozin's Comet is going to be... well, soon. And I think we've got to pull this off in the Spirit Oasis before it's over." Before all the firebenders lost that extra power the Comet would give them. Koh was a *water* spirit. His rule over the drowned showed that. And if worst came to worst and Koh just wouldn't listen...

Well. He was going to need all the fire he could get.

"Hmm," Iroh mused, following him into the heart of the city. "Yes; if my brother interrogated some of the survivors of the invasion fleet, he may have guessed the importance of the Oasis." He drew a mountain-deep, cleansing breath. "And now we are gathered to face him." Gray brows drew down. "Those who would come, at least."

Pakku sighed, one quiet puff of frost.

Um. Aang gulped. Face Ozai?

Well, maybe, he thought, worried. If he gets past Sokka and the others. He might; they've got Appa, but he's only one bison and even if Katara's incredible with water-blades they're going to have so much fire...

It's going to be bad. Really bad. I wish I was there! But I'm the Avatar. This is where I've got to be.

And I trust Sokka. He'll figure out a plan. I know he will.

"Let us find higher ground," Iroh stated. "I need to see what we will be defending."

"Didn't get a good enough look last time?" Pakku said dryly, a wave of strong arms lifting ice to raise them to the nearest rooftop.

"I fear I was a bit preoccupied." Reaching under his cloak, Iroh drew out a collapsed spyglass. "You are here," he nodded to Aang. "As I said you would be."

Pakku eyed the frosty parapets, as if he were thinking of bending a bit of slush down someone's neck.

"Sozin's Comet will touch our skies within hours. Which means..." Iroh pulled the spyglass out, and turned toward the southeastern horizon. And waited.

Aang frowned. And crossed his arms, because he wasn't going to fidget.

Wriggling his toes wasn't fidgeting, either. Even an airbender could get a little cold.

...Okay, whistling was fidgeting, but come *on*. They'd been here forever, and Iroh was just *watching*. "What are you looking for?"

"My brother's fleet," Iroh said dryly.

Oh. Okay, kind of... no. Not okay. "So... why are you looking that way?" Aang said warily.

"It is the way the wind will carry over the ocean from Onsenzakura. The nearest Fire Colony on the Northern coast," Iroh said, a bit testily.

"Um." Aang chewed his lip. "I don't know where Onsenzakura is, but I fought them in the high wind-road, way out over the ocean. If they're heading here, they're going to be coming..." He felt the sky's breath sinking from above, and angled himself almost due south. "*That way*."

"...Hah." A near soundless breath, from Pakku. "I'll have to remember that boy. No manners at all, but it seems three years at sea taught him *something*."

Iroh was looking at both of them as if they'd started speaking lemur. "But why would Ozai strike from that direction when his primary objective is-"

"I'm not the one who sees the spirit world, but I'd say your brother's *primary objective* is power," Pakku said sourly. "He threw away his wife for it. He may have murdered your father for it. He definitely tossed away his own heir when the boy challenged him in council-"

"Zuko never meant it as a challenge," Iroh said firmly. "He had no plans to break loyalty to my brother, even after..." He paled.

"Iroh?" Aang asked, worried. That wasn't a good look. That wasn't even a Bumi "we just did something utterly crazy and it's gonna *hurt*" look.

"My brother has never concerned himself with spirits." The words were barely louder than a breeze. "His concern was with the binding of loyalty, for it holds our people to him; and while Avatar Kyoshi's decree stands none can work against the Fire Lord's will and survive..."

Oh. Oh, he *knew* this, he'd been listening to Sokka. Temul was angry and awful and stomped all over anyone she didn't like, but she was a dragon-child and she didn't *lie*. "Unless there's a great name willing to stand up to the spirits for them," Aang nodded. "Like Shidan. And Master Piandao."

And-

"Zuko," Iroh breathed.

Zuko chafed his arms, watching stars fade away over the southern mountain peaks in the twilight before dawn. It was summer, even here in the mountains it wasn't truly cold...

Darkness, against the vanishing stars. Rounded and long and so *many* of them, lit by the briefest flashes of fire to warm night-chilled gases.

"...I really, really hate being right."

Chapter 88

It's the thin light before dawn. The stars have vanished into the faint, flat light that shuts away evening, holding a place for the sun.

Only on this day, the sun doesn't step in first. This day - as it did a century ago, as it will a hundred years from now - something else catches the sky on fire. The heavens turn red, as if a thousand forests blazed, and every soul born of dragon's blood feels the burning in their veins.

Sozin's Comet has returned.

The irony is - at least at Asagitsutsu - the firebenders who would ordinarily notice it the most care the least. Anyone of Sozin's line, and anyone even *near* one of Sozin's line, is *terribly busy*. A little matter of two sides trying their level best to kill each other.

"What a petty little place."

General Zhu Zhing stalked the bridge of the Fire Lord's flagship as they sailed over the southern mountains, staring down at the rag-tag little harbor and its ramshackle clutter of ships and hovels. You couldn't call the structures that lined the dirt trails buildings; shaped stone and green lumber and uncouth mixes of who-knew-what.

Not much to burn, Zhu Zhing thought, scowling as he scanned the site for any sign of the renegade prince he meant to destroy. *Barely enough to make an example with*.

Though the flames they were going to loose on this place should sear away the little wooden fishing boats and char right down through the soil. And that would be the end of that. What the fire didn't kill, winter would.

The only thing barely interesting about the valley was that it was already on fire. So to speak. There were flames coming up everywhere, even from the harbor itself. It wasn't entirely alien, not to a general who'd overseen the gas-fields at Nara, but it did make the neck-hairs twitch. This was supposed to be Earth Kingdom land, yet it dared to breathe pure fire.

...No. There was one more interesting thing, nagging at the back of his mind as they sailed onward. The sharpness of the valley edges under greenery, the faintest taste of sulfur in the air, the steaming little island in the middle of fiery waters-

It's a caldera.

It can't be a caldera, it's too big! How could there even be a caldera in the Earth Kingdom-?

The general did not look behind him. He could feel the Fire Lord's gaze boring into his back, assessing his readiness. Testing his will, to strike down those once considered of royal blood.

He will not find me wanting.

Zhu Zhing hadn't earned his exalted rank by discounting what was in front of his eyes. If this was a caldera, it was a lair of Fire, not of Earth, and the outlaw prince had picked better ground to stand than any spy had dreamed of reporting. Best to strike quickly, and be done with it. "Prepare to-"

Blue-white lumps arced up from the ground and harbor, dotted with darker specks like sesame

seeds on a rice ball.

Ice. So they do have a waterbender. Pathetic. "Fire!"

From platforms below each airship, flames roared out. Blazed toward the ice. Engulfed it-

Fwoom.

"Evasive man-"

The blasts cut Zhu Zhing off mid-shout, shockwaves rippling through air. The cabin rattled around them like dry peas in a pod, knocking some men from their feet and sparking a host of damage reports. He felt the gasbags overhead shudder against their lightmetal cage.

And at that, they were lucky. He saw flames spreading on two airships behind them, eating hungrily at the waterproofed crimson fabric protecting the gasbags.

That was natural gas! In ice?

Against his will, his gaze flicked back toward their lord and commander.

For a heartbeat, that handsome face was still as stone.

A ruby shadow in red and gold, Fire Lord Ozai strode forward. "Step aside."

Teo shivered, and made sure to breathe through his nose. The silk scarf wrapped around his throat helped keep the worst of the chill at bay, and the faint taste of sulfur said Asagitatsu's steam wasn't far below, but the air up here was still *cold*.

Brimstone tickled his nose. Teo wrinkled it to stifle any sneeze. Fire Nation airships were quiet. Much quieter than his father's war balloon, with its constant gusts of gas-fed flame to heat the air. And Ozai's fleet had people on board who weren't bending or flying the ships. Lookouts, specifically watching for, say, a crazy group of benders on a sky bison. The only advantage his gliders had was silence.

Well, that and some dabs of blue paint. He really hadn't wanted to repaint the gliders. Paint was weight. And wings were supposed to be *visible*. In case you got in trouble.

"If your friends can see you, so can your enemies."

When they got out of this, Teo was going to ask Auntie Changchang to sit down with Zuko and have a nice, long chat about the world being a place most people got through without *anybody* trying to kill them.

But that would be then, and this was now, and Ozai's fleet of airships was terrifying. Even if there weren't quite as many as they'd counted through spyglasses less than an hour ago. Teo thought he'd seen the distant blob of red divide in half; some turning more north and west, bows rising to catch the fastest winds north...

Focus. We're only going to get one free shot.

But it was kind of hard to concentrate, with fire-ice sailing up and fire blazing down and tendrils of flame writhing like octopi in midair. Even with a few hundred feet of altitude between him and the flames, his toes clenched at the thought of dropping any further down.

Yet that little twitch made his stomach seem to settle. He wasn't going to walk again. Healer Amaya had laid that out in sober, blunt phrases. Along with just as sober, blunt praise for his father and the village that he'd even survived. Most people who got their hips busted up the way he had - didn't.

But even if he couldn't stand, he could move his feet. And that had opened up more options with his glider than he'd ever hoped for.

Like, say, using his feet to steer, while his hands reached to the wind and *bent*.

Teo wagged his wings at the dozen gliders behind him, and stooped toward his target. Felt as much as saw them peel off into pairs; he didn't know how Air Nomads flew, but that was what *worked*, flying with a wingman in case you lost the updraft-

The comet's red light played over painted wings, turning irregular blue splotches meant to blend with the clouds to stark, flat gray.

...Oh, no.

And it wasn't the wind putting that chill down his spine. He'd seen their gliders in the sky just yesterday, he knew that paint should have made them all but invisible in the air...

And now they weren't. Now, all the Fire Lord's men had to do was look up.

Teo gulped. Took a deliberate breath. *Yeah. And if they'd looked up before we painted the wings, we'd be in the same fix. Everybody knows we're taking an awful risk. And they came anyway. We can still do this, if we move fast. I've got to trust them.*

Only three people behind him were benders, but they were all gliders. And slime bombs were good for more than just knocking people off mountains.

Aim... there!

One rudder, splatted right in the guide-wires. That should make things interesting.

Especially after this. Teo swooped back up into the sky again, reaching out to scoop and *push*.

Wind gusted at his touch, shoving the gunked rudder into a hard left. Metal groaned, squealed-Snapped.

Just one wire. Teo grimaced, turning to get a good view. *Darn. They've still got some control.*

But the airship was wallowing in the wind, now. And it wasn't the only one. At least four more were drifting out of formation. Two others were sinking fast, charred holes gaping over rings of blackened metal and rippling gas bags.

They damped the fires. Darn it-

He twisted his wings in a *whoosh* of wind and strained muscles, flames close enough he smelled burnt hair. *I think they know we're here.*

Altitude was life. Up and up and-

Ehuang's on fire!

But Ke was on her wing, using a backdraft to damp the flames while he guided her out of the fray. Teo took a deep breath, and headed toward another curve of rising red...

Smaller curve. Much closer than he thought. War balloon.

Teo jinked right, as if he'd meant to go after the next airship all along. Swallowed hard, and whispered to the wind. "Good luck."

"Sokka? Breathe."

"Yeah." Sokka gulped, hanging onto the war balloon's basket for dear life as gliders swooped, slime-bombs splatted, and fire writhed in every direction. "Breathing's good... why didn't somebody tell me this was a stupid plan?"

Leaning back to make sure no sparks had eaten into their balloon, Suki snickered. And if it was a little grim, well - he couldn't blame her. "If I remember right, someone *did*."

Ah. Yeah.

Hard to believe it'd only been a few days ago that he and Zuko had been glaring at lists of supplies and little airship models scattered over a map of Dragons' Wings. Zuko had a bit of steam trailing from his nose, they both had hands stained with ink, and there were piles of balled-up paper gathering in drifts in the corners of the room.

"No way," Sokka had said, grudging every word. "There's just no way we can fight them head-on. We're going to have to do something..." He waved his hand, searching for the right words.

Zuko sighed. "Stupid."

Suko straightened in his chair, putting on his best Ba Sing Se mock-affronted air. "I was going to say incredibly brilliant and daring."

Zuko nodded once. "Which is code for stupid."

"More or less," Sokka admitted.

Dark humor glinted in gold eyes. "At least we have the world experts on that."

Sokka gave him a look askance. "We do?"

Zuko had just smirked.

"Oh yeah." Sokka had taken a breath; more like a gulp, not that he was ever, *ever* going to admit it. "Us."

Now he had to remind himself to breathe. To keep it together, just keep going, and definitely not look at what was and wasn't burning below them. War balloons weren't exactly easy to maneuver, but they were angling up into the shadow behind the lead airship's cabin and the firebender's platform under it. Gingerly, he took over the furnace and flaps and got them closer, waiting for Suki's nod of *close enough*.

There was still way too much air between them and the wires outside the rear door when she did. Suki balanced on the basket edge for barely a blink, then flipped across. Grabbed hold, pulled herself up in one tight curl, and blew him a kiss.

He reddened under the helmet. She was just so *awesome* at this...

Suki's rope almost smacked him in the face.

He grabbed on, tying the balloon to the airship so they'd have a getaway plan. That was his story and he was sticking to it, even if the real reason was so he could have half a chance at looking *maybe* as awesome getting over there.

Which was going to be tricky. Water Tribe fur and leathers, he could pull all kinds of stunts in. Fire marine armor was a *little* more stubborn about acrobatics.

At least this isn't like that mess with Hahn.

Heh. No. Sergeant Kyo had shaken down his squad for the best-fitting armor they could borrow. Maybe Navy armor didn't look quite like Army stuff, but at least it wasn't eighty years out of date. If they were in and out fast - it should give them the moment of surprise they needed for this raid.

Which... wasn't exactly a *raid*, darn it. And if he didn't like it, Aang was never, ever going to feel right about what he and Suki were about to do-

But that's why we're up here. Sokka braced himself, and launched for the door. *So Aang doesn't have to do this.*

Ow. Hard metal - ack, feet were slipping off the ledge...

Suki caught his arm and hauled him in, hanging on until he got rope wrapped around one fist and nodded. "Fancier than I thought."

Huh. Gold trim around the doors. Which tweaked at Sokka's nerves, even as he edged up to look through the tiny view-slit in the door. He'd been on Zuko's own ship, briefly, and while there were a few tapestries and other kinds of fancy stuff around, the one thing the *Wani* and the *Suzuran* did *not* look like was fancy...

He couldn't see much of the inside. But what he could see matched the feel of metal moving under him; a door being opened *under* the main cabin, so a firebender could venture out onto the firing platform below.

Huh. Why are they doing that when Teo's people are up above-?

"Sokka." Suki's voice caught his attention like a hook in his ear. "Look down."

Down? Down was a sway of his stomach and a silent prayer that the Moon would look after poor idiot Water Tribe warriors who had the bad luck to be bouncing around in the middle of the sky. Down was where Zuko's guys were tossing up fire-ice, with bits of rock stuck in so the earthbenders could play along with everybody else. And where they were dodging any fire shot down from above; though he'd heard a few interesting *whooshes* that meant wave-style firebending was getting a workout-

Down... wasn't as far down as it should be.

Oh boy.

Ducking back to the door, he could see the firebender vanish out onto the platform. And hear the fire roaring down, impossibly far down...

Far enough to set masts on fire.

We've got to get in there!

One good thing about airships. Nobody'd thought about locking the door.

Where's a hurricane when you need one?

Perched halfway up the caldera wall on their friendly rock, Zuko focused his spyglass and stared at the sky. One thing to plot with Sokka how an airship attack would have to come to Dragons' Wings, if it came at all. A different beast entirely to stare at blood-black airships sailing out of a fiery sky. His heart was beating fast as a rabbiroo's. There didn't seem to be enough air.

Given the fire curling and crashing through the sky, being flung down by the Fire Lord's firebenders and deflected by his own, it was possible there wasn't.

Good thing there's a wind, or this could get ugly.

Katara was working with Sergeant Kyo's team closer to the harbor, keeping fire away from critical areas as she threw her will behind *stand against the Fire Lord*. Toph was close to her, flipping around rocks and helping Shirong keep a hold of himself; earthbenders never had a power-up like dawn to worry about, much less a firestorm like Sozin's Comet, and the Dai Li yāorén was as close to coming apart at the seams as Zuko had ever seen him. His family could have helped, but the Wens were with Huojin's fledgling Guard force, helping civilians stay out of sight and safe hidden in the ancient ruins.

Let them stay safe, Zuko hoped; thinking of his aunt, and his people, and a stubborn distant cousin fighting to master earth and spirit-healing. *If we lose, the world's going to need a lot of yāorén.*

I'm not going to let us lose. "Lieutenant Teruko!"

"Sir!" A quick snap of a salute.

The angle of the airships was good. Not perfect, a little more west would have been better. But it'd do. "Second line, now!"

She nodded, waving patterned war fans. Across the caldera, from a dozen little stone shelters and *Suzuran*, mirrors flashed back *Acknowledged-*

With a *vrump* of catapult cables loosed, obsidian shards knifed through the sky.

Too late, Zuko saw the war balloon tethered to the rear of the flagship.

Oops.

Great. He'd just killed Sokka's ride.

Volcanic glass tore through airship envelopes, peppering gasbags with holes. One of the fire-wounded airships seemed to shudder, balloon collapsing like whipped cream left in hot sun. Others sprouted sudden streams of water, dumping ballast to maintain altitude.

Ooo. Please let Katara see that-

Zuko froze, any orders he might have passed to Teruko lodged like ice in his throat. It was high. And far away. But with a spyglass he could see the flagship's cabin. And a glint of pale gold.

I can't. He's still my father, I can't-!

"The ballast." Zuko coughed, trying to get words through a rebellious throat. "The ballast is water." Water or powdered rock, that'd been their best guess. And flying over the ocean, water would be the easiest to drop or scoop up. A waterbender would have to know it was there to do damage with it, and what waterbenders at the North Pole knew anything about airships? "Pass the word. Tell people to get creative."

A firebender throwing rocks. Ozai narrowed his eyes as the airship lurched, officers shouting a flurry of orders through speaking tubes as the crew tried to compensate for torn gasbags. Steel clamps held steady through the shocks, keeping one of the glass viewports open; clear air, to let cold fire strike without grounding in steel. As soon as he found the right target. *I expected more of you, brother.*

He'd expected fire, lightning, and devastation. The Dragon of the West had earned his title. Even if this battle would end in Iroh's utter, final defeat.

Instead, he saw slapdash aim and haphazard defenses, with his *beloved* elder brother nowhere to be seen.

It must be a trap.

Why else would his traitorous son be out in plain view, as if daring them to strike at him?

I always knew you despised me, Iroh. But to use the nephew you claimed to prize as bait - you must truly loathe us all.

Not that he'd hesitate to strike Zuko down. Some lessons had to be learned in blood and fire. Given Zuko hadn't learned the proper respect the last time... this would be a very *final* lesson.

You seduced your own sister into defying my will. I don't know how you accomplished that, but your death will be swifter than you deserve.

He would strike the boy down. The cold fire would be ready in a heartbeat. As soon as he knew where Iroh was.

Eyes half-closed, Ozai reached out with inner fire. *Read the flow of orders. Find the center of loyalty...*

It was hard to be certain, with flames billowing like crimson silk, tossed by winds of bending will. But the patterns of mirror-flash and signal fans centered... there.

Impossible.

Zuko was the center; fire banked like hot coals, only flaring when he twisted a cone of fire to splash harmlessly onto scorched stone. Iroh's brilliant flame was nowhere to be found.

No. He has had everything he wished of life. He will not rob me of this!

Two could play at that game. Iroh had already lost a son to overconfidence.

And now, Ozai breathed deeply, readying himself to wrap negative jin about Zuko to call the lightning to him, he will lose a nephew, as well...

Metal screeched behind him. His bodyguards started, and moved-

Red armor was fighting red armor. One young woman with a fan... and one young man with an infamous black blade.

The battlefield might be clouded with smoke, but this was clear as dawn sun. Assassination. *Low War.*

Traditional tactics. Honored tactics, in their way; the weapons of the onmitsu, the wandering sword, the lord of a small domain desperate to save his people from a greater foe. The way Fire Lord Azulon had thought sufficient for his second son... but not his first. No; Prince Iroh was meant for greater, grander things than that. Grandeur that had led Iroh and his army to fail at Ba Sing Se... where Azula and two girls had gained *utter victory*.

Ozai's lip curled in a smirk as he shook out his fingers. Lightning inside the cabin would be unwise. *So, Zuko. You are Ursa's son, after all.*

The sky burned over the palace arena, clouds dark coals in fiery scarlet. Crackles of storm-glow danced on roof ridgelines, sparks flying to join the blue flames wreathing a delicate fist.

Around the boundaries, nobles and servants shifted like a red tide; a few motes of gold eyes burning with approval, others dark with frowns. One or two of the braver stood like islands against the storm, studiously aloof. Those were the ones not glancing toward the sparking rooftops, where there might or might not be onmitsu hidden.

Those are the ones I want.

A lash of flame, and her opponent and soon to be ex-general crashed to the ground. Singed, but from the rise and fall of his chest, still breathing. Barely.

Azula straightened, breathing deliberately even, blue flames flickering around her. "Are there any others who would claim they have a right to the Dragon Throne?"

Wind moaned past them, fluttering sparks and silk. The most impassive barely moved a finger to deflect flames from eating into scarlet threads.

She didn't let her eyes linger on them, scanning all the crowd. "Apparently some of you weren't listening the first time. You *will* follow me." Her hand flicked open, as if casting sparks to the wind. "Or you and all your households will flee the Caldera, today, and serve Fire Lord Ozai by preparing your domains against invasion. The Avatar's allies have scouted our defenses once. They *will* be back."

She stood with calculated ease, even as the fire raged inside to burn, devour, *kill*. Breathed lightly, eyes clear and calm, as if she could wait all day.

When the Comet passes, we're all going to crash...

Which was what made *now* the breaking point. They'd follow, or leave - or gather enough stupidity to come at her all at once, dueling customs be damned. Mai was hidden with senbons ready to throw, and her Dai Li were blending in with the walls just waiting to raise stone shields in front of her... but this was *Sozin's Comet*. If they tried to defend her from mass firebending, they'd only kill themselves trying-

"Byakko knows the true heir to the Dragon Throne."

She knew that voice. She could be lost, she could be insane; she could be a hundred years

drowned, and she would still know that voice.

Tall and elegant, paired dao at her side, Ursa stepped out of the shadows.

Nobles flinched back like doused flames, indrawn breaths a gust of wind. Byakko never spoke of it, but all knew the western domain had stood against Sozin's line for a century.

Sozin's line. But not me.

Azula smiled.

"They're late," Master Piandao observed from Pakku's crafted ice tower on the walls around the Spirit Oasis, shading his eyes to peer at the ominous red balloons sailing in from the sea, "but it looks like the Fire Nation made it to the party after all."

I wish they hadn't. Aang tried not to grimace. Because that was kind of a horrible thing to wish, that Ozai and all his airships were somewhere else hurting people instead of coming after the Northern Water Tribe...

But he could almost feel Sokka tapping Boomerang on his arrow and telling him not to be stupid. He didn't want the Fire Army to be here? *Nobody* sane wanted the Fire Army showing up *anywhere*. They were here, and he was going to do something about it.

...Well, kind of. Not exactly what people had in mind, probably.

But Sokka would say do it. Katara would tell me to believe in myself. Toph would punch me in the arm and say it was about time. And Zuko...

Zuko would understand. That was the scary part. Zuko didn't want to fight these guys, either. He just *would*. If he had to.

And I probably will have to. There's just something I've got to do first.

"My brother approaches." Iroh inclined his head. "And the masters of the White Lotus stand ready to aid the Avatar, in any way that you have need of."

Aang tried not to shiver. He wasn't cold; not cold *outside*, anyway. But he wasn't the kid who'd fallen out of an iceberg anymore, and he'd seen Master Piandao frown as he slipped down to ground level. Iroh might be offering as a White Lotus master, but he was still a firebender. And the Fire Nation *always* meant more than they said.

In any way. A great name didn't *say* things like that. From what Temul had thumped them all with, domain lords were responsible to their people and their land first. Helping somebody else always had limits, and polite firebenders always worked in a hint what those limits were. You *didn't* give help without limits, not unless-

He's trying to offer me his loyalty.

And Aang remembered what Sokka had told him, about the way loyalty tugged and pulled and *hurt* people of fire caught between their lord and doing what they felt was right. How Sokka sometimes thought he felt just whispers of Shu Jing's people, *wanting* the lord of their domain. And how domains on separate islands would, *had to*, get into arguments that needed to be settled - and if the Fire Lord had to be loyal to *both sides*...

Aang swallowed. *Temul tried to tell Kyoshi. She was killing the Fire Lords. But she wouldn't listen.* "No. I'm sorry. But - that's not the kind of help I need."

In the background, Master Pakku twirled an icicle between his fingers, mustaches canted to the side in sour interest.

Iroh cleared his throat. "I did say we stand ready to aid you-"

"No. You said you were going to help the *Avatar*. And that's what's wrong." Aang shook his head, wishing this was just a bad dream from Sokka's attempt at cooking. "The Avatar's the spirit of the *whole world*. You can't help the whole world! It's too big! Even the Great Spirits don't always agree all the time about how the world should work. How could you get in the middle of that, and not go crazy? Like Sozin-"

Iroh's expression was thunderous.

"Like Fire Lord Sozin did," Aang said bluntly. He stepped back, and crossed determined arms. "I'm not a firebender yet. I don't get loyalty. But I know it's not something you give to somebody just because that's what you think you *should* be doing. And it's not something you should ever give when what you're giving it to can't give it *back*." He swallowed, throat dry. "I'm trying. But I can barely look after myself half the time. I *can't* be a, a great name."

Snow rumbled up like an upside-down avalanche, and Bumi cackled out of the sudden hole. "He's got you, Iroh. Fair and square."

"You know him?" Aang blurted out. Looked between them, and Pakku, and Master Piandao's subtly arched eyebrows. "All of you know each other!"

"Of course!" Bumi hauled himself out of the earth, brushing snow off dark blue and white robes. "All old geezers know each other. You get to be our age, you realize who's worth keeping around to play a good game of Pai Sho. No matter what element they are."

"You..." For a moment, air seemed to leave his lungs.

This? Has gone way too far. We need some air... we need some Truth around here! "You've got a *really funny* idea of helping!"

"Eh?" Bumi looked surprised.

"The White Lotus is supposed to help the Avatar?" Aang said in disbelief. "I was *in* Omashu. Remember? You gave me a crazy test and said goodbye. I met *you*-" Aang squinted at Jeong Jeong, almost out of sight behind some snow, "and you told me to get lost. I came up to the North Pole looking for a waterbending master, found *you*," he eyed Pakku, "and guess what? You thought girls shouldn't fight, so you wouldn't train Katara when she'd *already* been training me. She worked out her own moves at the South Pole, by herself, without any help! She taught me when *nobody* wanted to help the Avatar. And you didn't think she was worth training, and you wanted to throw me out when I tried to help her!"

Piandao was stifling a laugh behind his hand.

"This isn't funny!" Aang insisted. "Maybe you were trying to keep Temul from killing me, but you never said anything about *anyone* out there who could help me. And *you*," he rounded on Iroh. "If you always wanted to help the Avatar, why didn't you tell Zuko?"

Iroh sighed. "He was loyal to his father-"

"Yeah? And? So? He *trusted* you," Aang shot back. "Didn't you ever *maybe* think that if helping the Avatar would help the whole world, that meant the Fire Nation too? And maybe if you told him that, he would have believed you? He got me away from Zhao when the Yu Yan caught me! If you'd just *told him* what you wanted to do, and why-" He flung up frustrated hands. "If that's what you call help, things got *really strange* the last hundred years!"

A faint red flush painted Iroh's face.

"The thing is, I think I get it," Aang admitted. "You felt like things were your fault. Like... I felt the whole war was mine. But it's not. And none of us can fix it alone." He looked up and south, at long shapes of red. Soon, way too soon, they'd be here.

And he was already tired. Why hadn't Master Gyatso said truth could be so *hard*?

Maybe 'cause I never had to hit people with the grown-up ones before.

Well, he just needed to heft one more. "You want one big battle to fix the world?" He pointed toward the burning sky. "There you go. I'll try to help when I'm done. But I'm the Avatar." He sat down by the Spirit Oasis, ready to meditate his heart out. "And right now, *my* enemy is here."

The first mirror that ever existed, was Fire and Water.

The spirit world was a maze. But flames on water could thin the boundary; mixing and melding to thin the walls, and open a way through.

Holding her breath, Makoto eeled into salt water.

Carefully. Move carefully.

There were bodies in the water, after all. No few of them with ill intent toward anything that still breathed, Koh's ally or not.

So don't breathe. Yet.

Fire was discipline. And discipline held, even when she swam near stony vaults pierced with holes. Through those holes a few errant bubbles trickled, melting from trapped ice with an odd translucence that wasn't quite air.

Well, well, well. Someone's found a way to store fire-ice. What... intriguing possibilities.

Her great-grandson, most likely. More Byakko trickiness. And oh, why, *why* had that vicious cleverness not chosen her side? What had humans ever done for *any* of her children? Even that turncoat Iroh - and where was he, she could sense he was not *here* - had lost all he cared for to the Earth Kingdom. Yet he played at helping those who would only destroy him-

Ahhh. Fiery eyes gleamed in the depths. So. He is not here... because he is with the Avatar.

No wonder the drowned about her moved but limply, without true purpose. Her ally's control must be... disturbed.

Avatar against Face-Stealer. That should be an interesting fight.

Heh. From a distance, perhaps. She already knew what the outcome would be. Kuruk had failed; did Aang truly think he could do better? Even with one of her own children at his side?

You followed the Avatar, and left your fledgling alone. How thoughtful of you, Iroh. Grandson and great-grandson, meeting again after so long.

A Fire Lord with an entire nation's loyalty to back him, against a yāorén with a few desperate followers and the interest of Asagitatsu. The balance in this fight could tip in favor of either side...

So I shall weight the scales.

She knew every artifact that sang to the spirits in the White Lotus vaults; she'd seen them place it all, before they'd fought her off in the wake of Asagitatsu's eruption and sealed themselves in. She knew how their own thirst for knowledge had led to many of their members' destruction...

And now it can lead to more.

Like a kadhait, she surfaced just long enough to take a breath, then dove to dance in the waves and bubbles and flames.

I'm so cold.

Katara took a moment to rub the gooseflesh on her arms; dragging the fear front and center so she could face it, rather than letting it spread from her to everyone her water brushed near. It was okay to be afraid. Only a moron wouldn't be afraid with the fires and screams and flying rocks-

And water moving where it shouldn't be.

In the archive? She curved seawater into ice to shield herself and the earthbenders from an airship's gout of fire, the concave arc reflecting flames and force to explode in the luckless firebender's face. She winced at the scream, even as the rest of her barrier flashed into water and steam-

Two swift jabs froze it into a hail of icy drizzle, pattering off her allies instead of seizing them with a drowning wave. Katara took a breath, and reached out to gather up scattered water. "Toph! Any ideas?"

"I was thinking sludge!" Another burst of flames pounded against the rocks Shirong had curved over both earthbenders. Toph grinned in their shadow, and crumbled black stone under her to powder with a scrunch of her toes. "If we can slap together some mud walls-"

"Then even if they bake it, they still have to break it!" Katara grinned. "Let's do it!" She moved her hands in a gathering swirl, plucking up tiny bits of salty ice from wherever they'd landed. Frozen drops had gone everywhere...

That's probably what happened. Someone just tossed water in the wrong places. Sorry about any scrolls left in there, but - as long as it's not the drowned, it's not a problem.

In empty eye sockets, blue flames bloomed.

Chapter 89

Her hands were shaking.

They're trying to burn us alive, Katara told herself, in a brief moment of stillness between roaring flames. *Anybody would be shaking.*

Toph's slurry-shields were awesome. On any other day, they would have worked. But the sky was red and flames came down like lava on the fortune-teller's village and they didn't have Aang to blow it all away.

Fire hit the latest wall like a meteor. Seared clay shattered-

Crumbled to stinging flecks on Shirong's fist and Toph's pointed fingers. The little earthbender was letting him handle most of the flying debris, slapping her hands to shoot dust into Katara's rising wave.

And up!

Another slurry-shield. Keeping them and the archers and fire-ice flingers in one sweaty piece. For now.

Other fighters hadn't been so lucky. Two wooden ships had burned to the waterline, and Captain Jee's *Suzuran* had even more holes than the old freighter had started with. In some places metal glowed cherry-red, before it suddenly went dark in a shimmer of heated air.

Lieutenant Sadao, Katara realized. Had to be; she could see Zuko pulling a bigger version of that shift of heat just yards away, a flow of arms and feet that made the air around them cool enough to breathe again, snaking that shimmer up and around an airship's gantry-

Metal went white, bending with a scream of tortured steel.

It won't be enough. It won't be, it can't be, we're all going to die-

Katara swiped sweat out of stinging eyes, and yanked on her own hair to stop despair in its tracks. What was wrong with her? They were holding out. They had to hold out. Sozin's Comet only lasted one day...

And in that day, the Air Nomads perished.

No. No! I'm not going to quit. I'm not going to give up! Sokka needs me, everyone needs me - I will never turn my back on people who need me-!

In the water, something white gleamed.

The back of her neck prickled. *A spirit!*

Which had to be a good thing. They were fighting fire, anything from the ocean had to be help...

From the shore near the vault, a serpentine wake streaked across the harbor, waves cresting white as bone. Breaking through those waves were patches paler yet, like fish bellies in the moonlight.

Oh, no...

Not help. Not help at all.

It was one thing to hear Gran-Gran's stories of the Ocean's claim to the drowned. Something else to see dead flesh breach the surface, blind eyes turning toward the shore. To know that they were coming, they were coming for anything that breathed, and there was nothing she could do.

Yes. There is.

The despair was real. The fear was real; she felt its fingers gripping everyone around her, freezing the will to fight, to defy Ozai, to *live*.

It's real. But it's not mine!

This time, she knew what to do.

Dig deep. Find the tides in your own blood. Feel the true pull of the Moon, away from haunted water.

Reaching into the well of her soul, Katara called up anger.

Fire on the ice. The stench of burning flesh. Grief on Dad's face, on Sokka's face ...

Once this anger had almost torn her tribe apart.

This time, I'm going to save them.

The little waterbender thinks she can fight. Makoto slipped through the waves, calculating her options. The sea serpent lich might be impossible to control, but it'd been all too easy to rouse. All she'd had to do... was whisper.

Kurage-onibi. Come to me...

Flickering wisps and tendrils of light, the jellyfish-spirits had hastened to her call. All the spirits here knew of Asagitatsu's restless sleep. Now they felt the battle raging, threatening to wake the caldera in one mighty roar that would slay mortal and spirit alike. And one of Asagitatsu's own blood called them.

Blue-white stinging tentacles had drifted with purpose, scribing calligraphy in the depths. "*What do you seek, dragon of Asagitatsu?*"

Her claws had slashed the water, strokes of violet-blue luminescence. "I would restore water to Water. Bring the touch of the sea to the human-cave above, to the bones Ocean well knows. Do this, and I shall see Asagitatsu's wrath appeased."

Translucent bells had tipped toward her; *acceptance*.

Like a rumbling of flames, Makoto laughed. Foolish spirits. Alone, she might not tip the scales enough to hold the caldera to her will. But with Koh as her ally?

Fear, little Avatar. First I finish the humans here. Then I come for you!

Show no fear. Show no emotion at all.

Aang climbed the Spirit World's mountain slope to the cave, feeling Roku and Yangchen like

hands on his shoulders. "Koh. We need to talk."

"My, my." A rustling of countless feet. "Such a short span of days since the last time you came calling. Why, if this happens again, I might almost think-"

A chitinous form coiled down from the ceiling, topped by a hauntingly lovely Water Tribe face.

"-That you *missed* me."

Drowned. Of course. Zuko kept heat moving, kept the flames off them, trying not to think too hard about what might happen if some of the venting flames blew out for a few minutes... long enough for gas to build up. *Because the day just keeps getting better.*

Yet in an odd, teeth-bared way, the day *had* gotten better. Because yes, the drowned *were* in Koh's power. But the harbor was in Asagitatsu's. It had to be taking a lot of power to overcome the volcano's resistance to the restless dead. He could feel Asagitatsu fighting it, in the way vented gases burbled and blazed. He could feel her fury prickling along the back of his neck, making every firebender in range jittery as over-boiled tea.

Koh's throwing his own power against us. And what does Uncle always say? If the enemy's closing with you, he's already lost!

This place, these people, this time - *here* was what Koh thought his greatest threat.

We have to hold. Less than a day left of Sozin's Comet. And the vents are taking the pressure off; if we can just keep the caldera steady a little longer, Asagitatsu won't go off for another thousand years. We have to hold!

And to do that... he had to do something about the drowned. Sergeant Kyo's team was good, but even Katara and a band of marines couldn't hold them back alone.

Agni, I hope the ice-throwers can keep the bombs off us just a little longer...

Tingzhe Wen pressed one palm to the ground inside the ancient ruin, feeling the earth tremble in echo of the fires roaring over the caldera. Asagitatsu was shuddering in her sleep, angry as a soul caught in someone else's nightmare.

Aren't we all.

He looked around his family, and beyond at the other civilians who hadn't headed up the mountain with the gliders. Everyone seemed to be calm. Well, as calm as could be reasonably expected, hiding out in the caldera wall and hoping that if Asagitatsu went up, it'd hold again this time.

No one's bleeding, and Huojin hasn't had to draw on anyone. I'll take it.

At least that odd silvery glow from one of the more buried rooms had stopped. Min had raised a stone wall to block the way, and stood fast to keep anyone from going down there. He was still at the tunnel entrance, keeping watch; and for once, Tingzhe had absolutely no intention of arguing with his headstrong son. The spirits were meddling enough around here already.

One day. We just have to survive one day.

He held Meixiang's hand, watching her stroke Jinhai's hair. Looked up at his beautiful, stubborn,

determined daughters; Suyin with her knife, and Jia with her satchel of earth-healing scrolls. "We're going to be all right."

We have to believe.

"I know what you're doing, Koh. And it has to stop."

"Oh? Does it?" The spirit's mask slipped away to the fanged baboon, cackling. "Have you seen where you are, young Avatar? This isn't the living world, where mountains crack at your bidding. This is the realm of spirits! You have no more power here than a dying weed. Or even... a *human*."

Aang nodded, face carefully blank. Funny. It was hard not to show fear. But it was even harder not to show sadness. "And that's why you're angry. You don't think the Avatar Spirit should have become a human, do you?"

Like a susurrus of waves, the restless legs stopped.

Patient. I've got to be patient. He's been angry a really, really long time.

"Ah." Koh's mask shifted to an old man's careworn face, long mustaches wavering in chill wind. "But who am I to tell the spirit of the world what is not wise?"

Don't smile. Don't flinch. "I'm not sure. Why don't you tell me if I'm right?" *Pause. Breathe, but don't smile.* "You're the first of the World Spirit's children."

"Well, well, well."

Oh, that didn't sound like a happy laugh, not at all...

"Do you have any idea..." The centipede body coiled. "What it's like to always be the child of a *child*?"

Delayed by children. Ozai's eyes narrowed. Intolerable.

The Kyoshi Warrior's fighting skills weren't unexpected, even as she tore through his guards with fan and sword. No one faced his daughter and lived to tell of it by accident. But the Water Tribe boy-

The pulse of fire let him scramble ungracefully aside, just before the cabin's floor erupted in fiery metal shards.

Ozai sidestepped a last few tumbling bits of steel, fixing the edges of the holes in his memory. For once, he wasn't sad to see red armor falling broken...

A red helmet did spin into the empty sky, tearing hairs from a dark wolf-tail. But the boy himself teetered on bent metal for a hand-flinging heartbeat, then flailed his sword forward, throwing himself back to safety with an ungainly improvisation so familiar, Ozai wanted to snarl.

Piandao. You have much to answer for.

Oh, but the swordsman's own teachings could be this child's fatal flaw. One of Water, taught to go to war by Fire? The spirit in that body had to be unsettled. Uncertain of himself. Weak, in a way a chieftain's son would never expect.

You fight for a scattered, dying tribe. I strike with the will of a nation!

"So the Southern Water Tribe serves as an outcast prince's assassins," Ozai stated, cool and level as if he faced the boy from his own throne, instead of circling knife-edged gaps over an abyss. "Who would think he would sink so low, to hide behind the very barbarians we've destroyed?"

"Oh, were you aiming at Zuko?" The sword was too busy batting fire away to shrug, but the boy's voice did it for him. "Darn. We should have waited *one minute* more."

"A greater failure than I even imagined." One step more sideways, and *breathe*. "Taking such as you for allies; only my wife's blood could be that *idiotic*. Water could never be loyal!"

The comet's power was flame under his feet, launching him across the gap in one burst of fire-

"We can't be loyal?" The swordsman wove across the edges of metal, sliding away from his strike with a shriek of steel on armor. "You're the idiot, Ozai. You wouldn't know loyalty if it bit you. Oh wait, it *did*. Azulon thought you were a menace. Your son wants you dead. Even your crazy fire-breathing daughter ran for it!"

One leather-wrapped hand snatched at an overhead grab bar, yanking the swordsman up into a feet-against-against-the-bulkhead crouch. "We don't have a lot of idiots at the South Pole. So I just wanted to get a good look." Blue eyes were hard and ready. "You don't know about loyalty. You don't know about anything that doesn't fit your plan to burn everything you can't control. You don't know-" Fingers loosed, *moved*. "-Zuko's *really good* at throwing stuff right back in your *face*!"

Ozai ducked, as something angled and sharp whickered through the air, sailing out the opened porthole. And let his lips curl in a smile, as fire flickered around his fingers. "You missed."

"If I could go back in time eleven centuries, I'd kick myself." Langxue cursed under his breath as he worked on burned and frightened gliders, glaring at the mountainside that hopefully hid them from the firefight over Asagitatsu. He wanted to be there. He *ought* to be there. But if Aang was gone and Dragons' Wings fell and *everything* went wrong... airbending had to survive. Or the world would be out of balance forever.

And even with a mountain in the way, he could still feel that cold snaking through the harbor, rousing the drowned with each undulating wave. "Should have smashed that skeleton when I had the chance!"

"Skeleton?" Saoluan said numbly. Shook herself, and held her flask to the lips of their latest groaning patient where she shuddered on a stretcher. "Here, Ehuang. Takes some of the edge off."

"Gnrgh... landed wrong..." The girl coughed, and tried to get up anyway, twisted leg or not. "Need to get back up there. Teo's still up there!"

"Teo said you come down, you come down." Saoluan screwed the cap back on her flask, and gripped the girl's leg as Langxue moved in with water-wrapped hands. "Okay. Count to three for me? One, two-"

"Aaaugh!"

Langxue sank his will into the water of muscle and tendons, using blood and chi to seal jagged edges of bone back into their proper place. "Now. *Cast*."

Ehuang mumbled a few very unladylike curses, as one of the earthbender farmers from down the

mountain molded clay around her shin and hardened it to slate. "You said on three!"

"No, I said *count* to three," Saoluan said firmly. "I'm not going to lie to a Temple kid."

"Oh." Ehuang blinked, woozy from the sudden drop in pain as water-healing numbed her. "'Kay..."

Saoluan almost dragged Langxue back from the stretcher, even as he looked around for any burns people had missed. "What skeleton!" she hissed.

Langxue raised an eyebrow.

"That skeleton?" From the way her eyes widened, Saoluan was probably as pale as her war-paint. "Guanyin's merciful veil... what do we do?"

"From here?" Langxue said wryly. "I'd have to spirit-walk. With Asagitatsu on edge, that's kind of the opposite of safe-"

Something flared in his heart, like one candle blazing on a moonless night. "Spirit-fire."

"The prince?" Saoluan whistled. "Is it going to be enough?"

One yāorén wielding spirit-flames, against all the drowned a revenant sea serpent could loose from the waters. One spirit-bender; even if he was a dragon-child, even if he was the caldera's lord.

And he's not, Langxue realized, chilled. *He should be. But the volcano's wavering. Like it's listening to someone else-*

Oh. Of course.

Eleven hundred years, and she's still killing. "We didn't dunk her in the spirit-ocean deep enough," Langxue snarled.

"Dunk *who*?" Saoluan persisted.

"Makoto!" And if Koh's ally was here-

Where is that face-stealing bastard?

"What you're doing is wrong."

"Is it?" A hissing inhale, like a snake-roach in a bad mood. "Even you would have to admit I don't want more than I'm owed, Avatar." Shadows seemed to shift like waves, as Koh flexed endless toes. "After all, you say the Air Nomads don't seek revenge. Yet you've helped so *many* humans chase after theirs. Jet. Chief Hakoda. Every Earth and Water soldier who set foot on a beach of Fire. Temul of Shu Jing; you let her *have* your friend Sokka, and she holds his spirit still. And that *lovely* woman Hama... who hated every child of fire that breathed, and herself most of all." Koh's voice dropped, a whisper of wind through dead leaves. "You let her have her revenge, little Avatar. You let her taint your precious little waterbender... and then you let her *die*."

No! Aang thought desperately. *No, that's not true-*

But it *could* be true. The way Koh saw it. Which made him no better than the ancient spirit, just going after what he wanted no matter how it hurt everyone around him...

No. That's not true. Think. Remember what you learned!

"Air Nomads don't seek revenge," Aang said plainly. "But revenge isn't what you're doing, Koh. Vengeance is awful, but it's supposed to have a purpose. It's supposed to make people *stop*." He took a breath. "But they can't stop if you don't tell them *what they did wrong*."

"Foolish child! They know-"

"No, they *don't*." He had to stay calm. He *had* to. "Asagitatsu killed Avatar Yangchen because she was there. And you set that up, I *know* you did, you and Makoto. And you watched while it killed everybody who cared about Yangchen, and I bet you thought that was *really funny*. All these humans knowing they were going to die, because they tried to help the Avatar put the world back together. Because they *cared* about her." Aang had to wet his lips. "And I bet you thought that was just - just fair. They got to hurt the way you do, all the time. Only they got to die, and forget. And you *don't*."

The mask-face was back, mouth opening slowly to bare gleaming fangs.

"You got them all killed," Aang got out, mouth dry. "And when they died - no one else remembered who you were. Who you *really* were. So nobody knew why you wanted revenge for Kesuk dying." He squared his shoulders. "And if they don't know why - *they can't stop*."

"That," a long, chuckling laugh, "*is not my problem*."

"Dad?" Min had slipped away from the tunnel entrance to crouch beside them, apparently convinced most benders would rather focus on strengthening their shelter than tearing down one spirit-blocking wall. "I'm sorry."

"You are, are you?" Tingzhe gave him a sidelong glance, and knew the glowstones gave enough light to catch his fond smile. "Humor an old professor, and tell me why?"

Min stared at him, incredulous. Suyin and Jia traded glances; Jia hid her smile with one graceful hand, while Suyin turned back to polishing her knife. Beside him, Tingzhe could feel Meixiang's shoulders shaking with silent laughter, as Jinhai abandoned chewing on a piece of jerky long enough to roll his eyes and give his big brother a look of *older people are weird*.

"It's been a very busy few months," Tingzhe said dryly.

"...I guess it has." Min looked his little brother in the eye. "Are you doing okay, shrimp? Agent Shirong says the Comet's really pushy."

"It *is*." Jinhai shuddered. "It's like dawns all piled up on top of each other in the middle of the night." He bit down on the jerky again. "Just wish it'd *go away*."

The earth rumbled, like something gnawing at Tingzhe's bones. He touched his wife's arm, and rose. "It will, Jinhai. We just need to be patient."

"I *hate* being-!" Jinhai looked around at other nervous families, and shrunk into Meixiang's arms. "...I don't want to be patient."

"Right now, neither do I," Tingzhe said plainly. "Practice your breathing. It might help." He followed Min back nearer to the tunnel, away from other embarrassing ears. "So. It *has* been a tumultuous few months..."

It was hard to tell in the green light, but he was fairly sure that darkening of Min's cheeks was a blush.

"Are you still worried about Ba Sing Se?" Tingzhe shook his head, and looked the young man in the eye. "You did what you thought best in very difficult circumstances. I wish I'd told you more, so you'd known more of what we were all getting into. But you did try."

"But I didn't do what was right." Min glanced aside, as if it was easier to get the words out by not looking at them. "I thought that as long as we was safe, it didn't matter what happened to anyone else. It wasn't my problem. *They* were the ones who brought the problem. And... I was wrong."

"Hmm." Tingzhe nodded, as if this were as serious as the fires threatening to crash down on all their heads.

And it is. How you make your choices, is how you live your life. I want my son to make the right choices. For all our sakes.

"And then I thought... I had to make up for... all the pretending," Min got out. "For Mom, and Jinhai, and... even Suyin."

Ah. Yes. "I can see why you felt you had to," Tingzhe stated. "I haven't always been the most honest of men, have I? We were always good citizens of Ba Sing Se." He nudged up his glasses. "Unfortunately, there was always a difference between being a good citizen and being an *acceptable* one."

"Yeah," Min admitted. "But - I was still wrong. We're Wens. That should have been enough. I should have *let* it be enough." His shoulders drooped. "I'm sorry... what?"

Tingzhe caught himself eyeing his son, and chuckled. "Well. If I know a young man of the Wen family - and I've known a few by now - you wouldn't be apologizing if you hadn't thought of some way to show you were serious."

"I - um..." Min brushed his hands over green sleeves. "You remember that excavating trick you showed us with rust, how you can find it where metal kind of falls apart into earth?"

"I believe I do," Tingzhe said, intrigued. He couldn't imagine what archaeology had to do with here and now, outside of a bit of a dig in reverse if something did bury them away from the surface. Perish the thought.

"Agent Shirong showed me the firebombs Captain Jee had on the *Suzuran*, so we'd know it if we felt one in the ground that didn't go off," Min said in a rush. "And I looked at the fuse. It's like a little firework."

Tingzhe adjusted his glasses. "Well, yes; I suppose that *would* make sense-"

"Fireworks are made with black powder. With *coal*," Min emphasized. "What if we yank the coal bits away from everything else?"

Tingzhe let out a low whistle. "How quickly can we get to the watchtower?"

Sharp as obsidian, the black blade whispered past Ozai's cheek.

Just close enough.

The boy was good. The boy was strong. But at the end of the day he was still a barbarian Water Tribe child, half-trained and half-grown.

Ozai wrapped burning fingers around a thinner wrist, and squeezed.

Bones crunched. Sweet and acrid scents of burning hair and flesh drifted up, as a black sword tumbled from numbed fingers.

Ah. Now this is war. "Pity. With a few more years, you might have been a dangerous opponent." And how convenient that the Water Tribesman was trying to cling to consciousness. This wouldn't have been nearly as much fun without a mind awake enough to feel the pain of burning alive.

"Sokka!"

"Suki!" The boy thrashed in his grip, trying to drive knees into his ribs; failing that, trying to bite. How uncivilized. "Just hit him already!"

"I doubt she will." Ozai smiled, and shrugged his arm, so the boy could feel his feet dangle over empty air. "That's why you'll always lose. Your kind don't know how to make necessary sacrifices." He breathed in smoky air. "And you never know when you've walked right into a trap."

As they had. Yes, five of his airships were burning as they fell. Yes, others were staggered and shaken. But there were still half a dozen converging on Zuko's exposed position, the iron casings of bombs gleaming dully as they fell through the Comet-lit sky...

Crump.

Iron smashed against an earthbender's wall of mud, crumpling like paper.

What?

Another *crump*, iron flattening like a feather. And another, and another...

"Steel's always been the Fire Nation thing, right?" The boy's left hand fumbled at the ragged edge, searching for a hold. "Ships. Coal platforms. Wall-boring drills." White teeth showed against dark lips, stained with blood. "So what are you going to do when *metal* bends?"

Impossible. No one bends metal. It's some kind of trick, it can't be-

"Sokka!" The Warrior was spinning, trying to get past his last guard, her armor slashed and seared. "Don't!"

Grabbing the edge, the boy yanked *down*.

Fool.

Ozai let himself fall through the air, releasing seared flesh with a smirk as he braced his chi and rose on blazing heels. The boy was already plummeting fast, blue eyes widening-

A whirring whicker in the air.

Thock.

Black.

The stink of wet and singed fur. Leather and wood, smashed into his nose to the point of pain. And a reassuring, low rumble, that told him the solid weight hurtling him through the air was going to stay there.

Sokka pried himself up off Appa's saddle edge with his left hand, just in time to catch a familiar v-shape of carved wood and bone tumbling away.

Fire Lord, two. Boomerang - win.

Flames snuffed out like a candle, as red and gold fell through the comet-lit sky.

"Don't feel bad," Sokka muttered under his breath. "Zuko fell for that one, too."

Dark as blood, silk struck phosphorescent water-

Sokka's eyes widened, and he jerked his gaze away, wishing he could bury himself in Appa's fur. Wishing, for one desperate moment, he was as blind as Toph.

Too late.

Dead hands in the water. Empty eye sockets. Snapping teeth.

...I am never, ever telling Zuko.

"It is your problem, Koh," Aang said steadily. "I'm the bridge between the living world and the spirits. I'm the one who sorts things out, so people and spirits can live together. And I'm telling you right now, your whole twisted game is *over*. You know they don't know what they did. You know there are humans who'd try to fix it if they *did* know what was wrong. And you didn't tell them. That means *you're wrong*." He crossed his arms, not flinching. "It's over. Now."

Like a shooting star, a fire in her heart flared and vanished.

No...

No warmth. No comforting force of a will to power twinned with Makoto's own, a will that had faced neglect and indifference and burned all the stronger, conquering, ready to *take* what his elder brother would never give.

No!

Emptiness. Her clan was gone. All of her blood who willed the humans' destruction were gone. This... this was not what Koh had promised.

He lied.

She knew he lied to Avatars. Taunted and teased them, enjoying all their frail human memories didn't know. She'd known he was lying to Wan Shi Tong, promising the owl all the knowledge ancient blood had hidden away, treasures the spirit hungered for yet could not touch alone. And she'd known the owl was a fool to think that was anything but a lie; that knowledge was born of human hands, and Koh hated everything with a drop of human blood.

But not my kin. Koh swore he would never touch them!

And - he hadn't.

He lied to me!

Shrieking, Makoto soared from the bloody waves. A beat of her wings and Koh's own borrowed

power split the waters, pouring away from hastily shaped stone vaults.

Fire-ice. The fools created their own doom.

Like called to like. And even with her traitorous great-grandson's will tugging at the flames, *she* was still Asagitatsu's dragon.

Heart a blaze of cinders, Makoto spat fire.

Something's happened.

He could feel the yank of a strong hand on his thorn-embroidered collar, hear a marine's calculated curses as Lieutenant Teruko hauled him out of the front lines. And that was wrong, he needed to be there, the Drowned were boiling out of the water *everywhere*, salt lines weren't holding them back, his people *needed him fighting-*

But he'd seen a flash of sky-blue wings, washed to gray by the Comet's light. Felt the fires roar up in the harbor - and then everything had *blurred*.

Ground's shaking.

Not blurred. Double vision.

Caldera overlapped with caldera. The drowned were moaning. His people were shouting, fighting for their lives.

Asagitatsu was screaming.

"...Not listening!" Toph's voice, carried on the caldera's rumbles. Green robes overlapped with green light, as if the earthbender had roots into rock like a spirit-tree. Behind her was a moon-glow of blue, fierce as a storm. "Get him back, he can't fight if he can't even *see* straight-"

"Makoto." Zuko gripped Teruko's arm, hoping she heard him. Hoping *anybody* heard him. "She's going for Asagitatsu's heart. We've got to stop her!"

The marine's voice was distant, washed over by screams like waves on the shore. "Sir, *dragon...* out there... no chance to get to the island..."

"No." Zuko swallowed, throat dry. "Not in this world." He blinked, trying to focus on flesh and bone, instead of the chi-push of the Comet and Asagitatsu's demanding scream. Tried not to shake at what he knew he was going to have to do. "Look after me."

Reaching inward, he fell away from the world.

"Oh no, little Avatar." It was almost a purr. "No. It's only just *begun*."

Chapter 90

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A cold wind seemed to blow through Azula's soul, even with Ursa's hand on her shoulder. The throne room's flames flickered, faded-

Went out.

Azula let a breath sigh out of her, as her mother stifled a moan that mingled sorrow and weary relief. She didn't know what to do. She didn't know what to feel.

I never know what to feel. What else is new?

It was like scraping your knees in a fall you saw coming. It hurt, but it wasn't surprising. From the intelligence Mai and Ty Lee had assembled, and the generals Azula herself had made sweat, Fire Lord Ozai had taken the airship fleet north with the expressed intent of ending the "Water Tribe menace" once and for all.

Right, Azula thought dryly. Because that worked so well the last time.

Admittedly, it was summer, and Sozin's Comet was here. Fire would never be stronger. But if the Northern Tribe really did have the giant water spirit monsters some of the classified reports had mentioned, and the Avatar were anywhere in the vicinity...

Game, set, and match.

It hurt. It wasn't fair. She didn't want this to be real.

But not wanting her brother to be an idiot had almost killed both of them. Not wanting Ty Lee to be bound to an Air Nomad's stupidity had almost killed her. And not wanting Mai to ever, ever leave her had almost driven away one of the few people who'd ever called her a friend.

I am the trueborn heir of Fire Lord Ozai. What I want... isn't as important as what my people need.

Azula straightened her shoulders, and looked at her little court; airbender, noble girl, and the Fire Lord's widow. "Summon the Fire Sages." There was steel in her soul. But the next words hurt. "Fire Lord Ozai is dead."

Ivory bones curved up into the sky, water knitting around them like sinew and flesh. Cold light gleamed in huge eye sockets, puffed like a whale's breath from the top of the skull.

It's as big as a great whale, Katara realized, heart drumming like storm waves on the shore. The whale-killers, the legends... the wolves of the sea...

Legends she'd never heard, until Master Pakku had picked up a drum one long night and chanted an ancient story. And she'd thought it could only be a story. There wasn't anything in the sea that could hunt down a whale and tear it apart. Only humans did that.

Bone claws struck the harbor, and a razor wave sliced toward *Suzuran*.

No!

Katara slapped air to send it off-course, stiffened it with her will to make the wave ice. She'd seen plenty of Fire Nation attacks; if seawater struck steel that was already heated red-hot-

Some did.

Metal screamed like the dying.

"There you are, tide-child."

Silence, in the blue lightning-flickers of eyes. She couldn't hear the fires. She couldn't hear the screams. There was just the endless quiet of the deep, like slipping down through storm waves to clear, dark water...

No! Aang didn't let us drown then. I won't let us drown now!

Fire and steam vents and an over-the shoulder roll taking him behind a jagged lump of basalt-

Zuko held his breath as the fire and heat went past, unwilling to risk a sword of flame burning his lungs to ash. He'd pestered Langxue with questions about the spirit-shore any moment they'd both had time, but far too often the younger yāorén's answer had been *I don't know*.

Could Makoto's breath of fire shred him from the inside out? He didn't know. Could she kill him here? *Yes*.

I'm not going to die that easily.

Flame hot enough to melt rock gave him his own weapons. He swirled a ball of molten glass between two hands, flung-

Blue wings beat hard, lifting Makoto clear of golden glass. She swooped... and tumbled sideways, caught in a gust of sudden steam.

Zuko was moving anyway, eyes on the shaking ground while he listened to the sky. Everything was as red-lit here as it would be in the real world, but hotter than it had ever been since they'd come to Asagitatsu's caldera. Hot enough to make his head swim; almost too hot to breathe, even when there wasn't fire coming at him...

A shimmer was his only warning. He dodged cracked earth as it crumbled, yanking his left arm even farther back; and never mind it screwed up his balance, if that was what he thought it was-

Augh!

Not burned; though he'd feel like he had the mother of all close calls tomorrow, and if there was a hair left on his arm that *hadn't* gone up in smoke, it was probably praying not to be noticed.

Superheated gas. Oh, joy. Guess I should just be glad it isn't on fire...

A beat of wings.

He held still even as it grew louder, trying to place exactly *where* he was.

It looks a little like the shore away from the harbor. If it decided to get set on "furnace". But I can't see the water, and there's a whole freaking volcano where the island cone should be-

Oh.

Rock groaned, tearing beneath his feet. He dodged right, letting the up-thrust take Makoto's next breath.

This is Asagitatsu. The way she used to be, before she killed an Avatar.

"I know you're wrong." Aang held a mask's gaze, face still with an effort that felt worse than trying to earthbend all of Ba Sing Se. "You know you're wrong. So why are you doing this?"

The chuckle was loud and long and shook his bones like an avalanche of ice. "Because I *can*."

"Okay."

He wasn't going to smile. He was *not* going to smile, even though the startled look on Koh's face was *priceless*.

"That's all I wanted to know," Aang said simply. "If that's how you want to play... then I guess you can't complain when I do *this*." He breathed in, and out.

Everything is connected.

And if that was true - then even here in the spirit world, he could reach out to his friends. "Katara? Go get 'em."

Sound was the crackle of the flames. The grit of stone on stone as Toph smashed waterlogged bodies. The wail of the wind, the roar of her own heart beating-

My heartbeat. My blood. Nobody bends it but me!

It felt like swimming through swamp muck. But Katara took her stance, and raised arms heavy as lead. Not a flowing movement, but hard and sharp and solid as the strikes she'd made half a year ago, screaming at Sokka and shattering an iceberg.

Ice groaned out of fire-dotted waters, catching bones in a glacial pincer.

Laughter echoed in her skull, as bone-claws tore rivulets of water from her trap. "You can't fight water with water!"

"I'm not." One deliberate step forward. Two. Not Master Pakku's stance. More the precise steps she'd seen Toph use, through long months of trying to save the world.

I'm not fighting water. I'm fighting the sea. The dark sea, that tries to suck you under and give nothing back. And the only escape from that is... land.

"Hey Toph!" Katara's grin was sharp and hard as an ice shelf. "Ever see a mountain made out of ice?"

She *squeezed* her hands together, ice groaning against struggling bones.

What glaciers do best, is grind.

Lava and rumbling and darkness; between the smoke and the cracking, shifting basalt shooting up and falling underfoot, it was like trying to run blindfolded through the Catacombs-

Fire lanced out of the sky.

Except the Catacombs didn't have flying dragons in them.

Zuko dodged behind what had been a towering pine. Now it was just another crackling tree of fire, like the rest of the forest that had once clothed Asagitatsu's mountain. It shattered in Makoto's blast, a whirl of cinders and flaming limbs cascading down like rabid fireworks.

Great. I need cover from my own cover. Zuko rolled, beating out sparks on his robe, trying not to swear. Though between the moan of tortured rock and the high scream of fiery gasses tearing free from the lava, even a dragon would have a hard time hearing him.

How can she do this? Asagitatsu was her mountain, and the mountain's screaming. If we don't do something she's going to kill everything-

But he already knew *how*. He'd lived with Azula.

Dark dragons only care about what's theirs. I took Asagitatsu away from her.

Killing everything might be just what Makoto wanted.

I've got to stop her. I've got to get Asagitatsu to listen.

I have to get to the heart of the mountain.

Not that that looked possible, with an enemy that owned the sky-

A howl tore at his ears, as he dodged behind an uplifting ridge.

...And maybe the sky's not too happy about that.

Serpentine blue arced in a wingover, shimmering like a mirage as Makoto dodged a sudden updraft from the rent stone.

He had to dive away from the ridge himself, before the pure heat radiating from new stone cooked him like an egg. He could redirect heat if he were standing still, but given he *couldn't* stand still he had to move or be air-crisped royal fire flakes-

Wait a minute.

Feeling the heat through his robes, Zuko smirked.

We're going to make it, Min chanted to himself, clapping stone blocks together to squash drowned bodies as his father delicately yanked the coal and sulfur out of bomb after falling bomb. *We have to make it...*

But it was like trying to fight the sea. So many bloated fingers. So many grinning skulls. So much armor, dripping slime and seaweed. He could see other fighters holding against the tide closer to the shore, little knots of stone and fire and steel... but they were human, and tiring. And their enemy was already dead.

Guanyin, please... don't let them get past us...

The world was on fire, and it wasn't enough.

Make them burn. Makoto beat her way through volcanic gusts, seared wings no match for the grief and fury tearing her heart. *Make them pay...*

It wasn't enough, for the child of her child. It could never be enough.

But if Shidan's get had drained off some of the pressure under the mountain, they hadn't drained off nearly enough. Prod the spirit to erupt, and the north would burn.

If she could only *reach* it.

A year ago this flight would have been over in moments. No other dragon held a claim on Asagitatsu's heart. None would *dare*.

But now the mountain itself fought her; cinders burning her eyes, brimstone eating at her lungs. Angry and in pain, the volcano-spirit still knew who'd bound it to slumber unknowing. And who'd awakened it, granting Asagitatsu the right to *choose*.

Damn all yāorén!

Powerful creatures; yet they were crippled by their own youth. They'd had no time to learn the ways of the spirit-shore. She'd seen to that. It'd taken three of them to beat her last time. This time... she scented only one.

Shidan's cub.

The boy who'd turned on his own blood. The *whelp* who'd dared to wrest Asagitatsu's will away from hers.

You... you laid this trap for the blood of my blood.

I will kill you, little yāorén.

She had to. Asagitatsu might not erupt while another will begged her to spare his clan. Or she might only erupt slowly, fitfully, granting the humans about her caldera some slim chance to escape.

That, Makoto would never allow.

Below, a bit of red fluttered from rock to rock, trying to keep to cover as a dragon-child sought Asagitatsu's heart.

Clever. But not clever enough.

Snarling, Makoto twisted into a dive.

If this doesn't work, I am so dead.

Zuko shot a few precise bolts of flame; the tiny fire-darts that would burn a hole through a bow, or even pierce armor with a needle of fire. Flame-darts that flew high and far...

And fizzled out, at least a hundred feet below blue claws.

Now run!

Dragons knew how far they could breathe. Which was - for a dragon Makoto's age - *much* farther

than a teenage firebender could bend. A firebending master like Iroh might have been able to reach her. Maybe.

And now she's sure about that - oh, shi-!

He dove into a roll as thin basalt cracked under him, almost trapping his foot between grinding rocks and lava. He didn't *think* his ankle was broken, but the way it was screaming at him he couldn't be sure-

He spun as he rolled, a sweep of one hand curling Makoto's next breath away and over him.

Move, keep moving, don't stop!

Mountain firebending would have stopped there, only deflecting the flames. He turned with them instead, ignoring seared skin, scooping up fire and lava-heat and the watery *shimmer* of superheated air tearing up into the heavens...

Toph had held a mountain rooted with her own stubborn will. He just had to get a mountain's rage to reach out and swat the sky.

And if there's one thing I can do - it's annoy anything.

The heat he scooped up chilled the lava, like an ice-needle stabbing into an abscess. He felt Asagitatsu *yelp*.

Then lava and flames *roared* from rent basalt, a torrent of flaming gases arching toward the sky.

It was like bending burning leaves. Only much.

Much.

Hotter...

Gyaahhh!

The heat was like diving into lava. She was an ancient dragon, she *could* survive that - but not unprepared.

How did he - how could he-?

Eyes were shut against the flames; nostrils sealed against gases that would have boiled her from the inside out. But she was a dragon, she could feel her own fire in the heated air. Vertigo wouldn't kill her. And the heat wouldn't have time to kill her.

Blood boiling, Makoto almost chuckled. Kill a dragon with flame? What did he think he was? Oh, he could *hurt* her. And she would have to retreat. For now.

Silly yāorén. You gave me my own escape.

Superheated air. Air so hot it *reflected*.

Claws sliced an arc, and the sky became a mirror.

Trailing smoke, the blue dragon hit shimmering air. And vanished.

I don't believe it. I don't - after all that, she - argh!

He took deep breaths. And tried not to choke on the sulfur in the air. He couldn't help seeing red - Sozin's Comet, there was red light *everywhere* - but he could try to hang on and *think*.

So she got away. She's hurt, and she's out of the spirit-shore. She won't be back here in a hurry. That means we've got time-

Basalt splintered under his feet. Zuko jumped, rolled; half-rolled back, an acid bite of brimstone the only hint before another vent tried to barbecue him. Got halfway to his feet, and crouched there, trying to figure out which way to run as the mountain itself howled in agony.

...Just, not very much of it.

It burned, like ice in a cut. It tried to steal Katara's breath, like hailstorm air. It was bone and age and *hatred*, for the human-lives who'd kept it dry and powerless to kill...

I am the last Southern waterbender. Katara moved trembling hands past each other, a hairs'-breadth at a time. I am proof... that the world... will not kill us!

Ice closed, like a mountain falling. Groaned, still sliding. Blue light danced along its surface, like storm-fire on a ship's mast-

Sparked, and died.

An ivory powder of bone dusted out, and blew into fiery wind.

Hands shaking, Katara wiped the sweat off her brow. *Gone. It's gone. Now we just have to-*

Out of the water, more dripping hands reached.

Oh boy...

Quiet.

...Well, mostly quiet. If you didn't count the splitting rock, and thunder-rumble of magma, and screaming gas vents.

She's got to be in here somewhere... "Asagitatsu!" Zuko called to the wind. "Brave lady! Mountain-heart! Your people call to you! They seek you, to do you justice!"

Basalt grated over itself. Here, there, everywhere.

No. I can't fail. People need me! "Please," Zuko whispered to the wind. "Help me find you. Help me *help* you."

At his feet, rock broke open, sparks flying-

In a hissing vent, a familiar blue flame bloomed.

Zuko caught the tiny flame in his hand, gladly feeding it with his own strength. "Can you take me to her?"

Flame ebbed and brightened; a silent nod.

It wasn't that much farther.

The great dragon lay in a broken field of lava, burnt and bleeding. Filmy eyes blinked at him, as her scaly hide writhed with the forces within.

She's going to blow. We didn't have enough time, the Comet's too close...

No. He'd come this far. He was *not* giving up now. He knew fire and water. He knew how to make them work together.

Now I just need to get them apart.

A red dragon and a white. He pictured them in his mind. Reached out to Asagitatsu's massive head, and beyond to the fire and water within...

You don't have to be apart forever. Just - fly in tandem.

Fire and water and chi. All he needed to heal, was here.

The volcano's spirit tilted her head, and breathed.

The world was *warm*.

Not hot. Not burning. Just warm all over, like Toph was standing in the sun. Warm and suddenly quiet; as if the drowned suddenly couldn't sense who to attack, because the whole world was holding its breath...

So still.

The ground thrummed under her feet, like burbling magma had suddenly calmed and settled into one steady flow. There was a crackling far away across the water, from the cone of Asagitatsu; but it was a measured crackling, like a watched fire, as the pressure under her feet spoke of hot stone there pushing up and up...

Something pulsed in the rock, like a shudder of hot mud.

Uh-oh. "Everybody, get down!"

Toph yanked Shirong down with her, as every vent blazed at once.

Spirit-flames. Teruko stared, wide-eyed, as heatless white fire leapt from vents to defenders to lurching dead bodies. Where the flames passed, the wounded took a second breath, and the dead crumbled into pure gray ash.

The ground was still shaking under everyone's feet, but her heart soared. This wasn't the jagged, deep quakes of an oncoming fire-cloud eruption. These quakes were shallow, steady; matching the pulse of hot black lava pushing up out of Asagitatsu's cone.

We did it. Frost and ice it, we did it! It's an earth eruption, not water-lava. Oh, Agni...

"...Ow."

She almost missed it in the sheer noise of a hundred beleaguered defenders striking back. But the spirit-flames leaping to swords and stones and armor were letting them all beat back the drowned,

enough for her to take a moment for the wobbly young lord trying to sit up.

He looks terrible.

Singed hair, and coughing, and suspiciously reddened skin on his left hand. But he was alive. Which was more than you could say about a lot of people after a spirit-walk. "Sir!"

"Makoto's down," Zuko got out. Coughed again, and blinked at the chaos around them. Smirked in satisfaction, as waterlogged bodies vanished in steam and white flames-

And swore like a sailor as yet another airship bomb hurtled at them, deflected at the last minute by somebody's hastily-raised block of basalt. "I don't believe it. They're still shooting at us?"

Teruko wanted to sit on him. He was pale, chilled, and who knew what else walking with the spirits had cost him.

But he won't stay down. Not while we're in trouble.

She dropped him a wink instead. "No rest for the wicked, sir."

"Oh, hell." Her commander creaked to his feet, familiar scowl on his face. "We already got through a volcano, a dragon, and the Face-Stealer's little army." His good eye narrowed. "Might as well make it a clean sweep."

Asagitatsu's fires were long miles away, but Aang could still feel them. Hot. Clean. Burning away the loss and pain tying the drowned to Koh, deflating the Face-Stealer's stolen power in a clatter of chitin.

Fangs gnashed, never quite touching him, as Aang held his face immobile. "This... doesn't matter," Koh hissed, coiling endless legs. "I am old, and powerful, and *wronged*. You can't stop me!"

"Yes, I can," Aang said flatly. "If you're going after humans for killing the Avatar - and that's kind of screwed up, given you've been trying to do the *same thing* - I'm the one who got wronged. *I* get to say who takes revenge for me. And who doesn't. And I don't need revenge." The airbender crossed his arms, decision final. "Because I forgive them."

Koh's eyes glowed, hateful red. "They wronged the entire spirit world-!"

"And how much did the Avatar wrong them, wrong *every* spirit, when Kesuk went crazy?" Aang said sternly. "They did the best they could. That's what humans *do*. If fire's not wrong when it burns people, and water's not wrong when it drowns them, then humans aren't wrong for trying to *fix* things." He paused, just long enough to let the next words sink in. "*Because they can.*"

Reports from Chief Arnook's runners said the Avatar was still by the Spirit Oasis, eyes glowing. Hopefully, that was a good sign.

Iroh looked over the battlefield - ice and soot and water sloshing through the city where it shouldn't - and hoped it was a very good sign. They'd brought down most of the airships, between the White Lotus and a host of Northern waterbenders. And once any ship came within a few hundred feet of the ice, he and Jeong Jeong could sear enough of the gasbags to make sure it *stayed* down. Piandao was fighting alongside the Northern Tribe's warriors against those who made it to land, and that was all the better; no few soldiers who saw the legendary swordsman bearing down on them surrendered on the spot.

But there were still some airships flying, and so many of the folk he'd fought beside were burned and bleeding...

His head came up. Something in the battle had *shifted*.

Through clouds of smoke and ice-mist, he saw an airship banking south.

Can it be?

First one. Then two, and finally a half-dozen survivors. Sooty, bedraggled, limping as the wind pushed them... the airships rose, and sailed away.

Brushing back sweat-damp hair before it could freeze, Iroh saw Chief Arnook stalk through the snow toward him. "Is it over?" the weary chief asked.

"It may be." Iroh stroked his beard, conscious of the soot staining it. "It will be some hours before the comet is fully gone. I would keep a watch on the walls, in case they decide on a second assault... but for now, one might consider sending those of spiritual power to Avatar Aang's side, in case he may need our aid." He inclined his head to the chief. "Which is where I intend to go."

"I am sure he will appreciate your presence." Arnook's gaze looked over ruins of ice and smoke, unutterably weary.

"Speak plainly," Iroh requested. And did his best to soften it with a smile. "Avatar Aang has had words with the White Lotus on the keeping of secrets. And we are allies."

"For now," the chief agreed. "But if the Fire Nation is gone... I expect you soon will be, as well."

Iroh nodded, slow and deliberate. "An expectation? Or a hope?"

"You, and Avatar Aang, have done your best to defend us." The chief's smile was sad. "But this is the home of the Moon and Ocean, the stronghold of Water. If you'd never come here, would the Fire Nation have dared to attack us?"

"They would have," Iroh said gravely.

"I believe you. But... my heart is not so wise." Arnook looked up, to the red-black sky. "It will take my people years to recover from this."

Ruined houses. Ruined lives. Nothing Iroh hadn't seen before, in long years of campaigning.

But they were never my people's houses, Iroh realized. My duty as a general was to take and hold our enemies' land. Never to care for it afterward.

As Zuko cared for Dragons' Wings. He had seen the aftermath of Fire Nation assaults across the Eastern Continent. He had known what Ozai's attack would do to his people.

And he would not leave them to face that alone.

The chief sighed, voice almost soundless. "I know this war isn't the Avatar's fault. Yet a part of me still wishes he'd never come."

And Iroh *knew* that tired rub of knuckles across a knotted brow. He'd seen it from his nephew, on too many late watches to remember. On too many days, chasing the Avatar.

I'm tired. Beyond tired. I just want the world to go away.

But people need me. I can't stop. Not yet.

Even when he'd been laying siege to Ba Sing Se, Iroh couldn't remember ever being that tired.

Be well, Zuko. I will return. And when I do - I think it is high time that you spoke, and I listened.

"Suki, jump!"

She landed in the saddle behind him with an *oof*, and a few muttered swears that would have had Gran-Gran washing her mouth out with snow. Frankly, Sokka didn't blame her. Landing on Appa from the air was never fun. Add in that the big guy hated fire, and there was all kinds of fiery mayhem and ominous airships to dodge.

Sokka patted the base of a horn, trying to keep his voice calm. "Good job, buddy."

Suki gripped the edge of the saddle, smudges all over her face and scorch marks across borrowed armor. "What do we do now?" she called up to him, as the half-wrecked airship they'd swooped away from lurched to the windward. "We can't just tell them the Fire Lord's dead!"

Good point. Though some of them would *know* he was dead. Sokka could feel it in the way he breathed easier, like getting out of smoky air.

I'm going to have a long, long talk with Dad.

Right now, though, he was going to use this. Half the airship fleet was still sailing, but in tatters. Anybody high enough in the command chain to be loyal to Ozai had just suddenly come unmoored. Drifting. And Dragons' Wings was on fire but still stubbornly *there*, the drowned collapsing in white flames, steam pouring from a hundred vents, and ice and rocks and fire sailing up whenever a good target got in range.

Asagitatsu's still here. It's the height of the comet, the time when she should be erupting - and we're all still here.

They're beaten. They just don't know it yet.

"C'mon buddy!" Spying circling specks above, Sokka tugged the reins up and left. "Yip yip!"

"Sokka!" Teo called from under painted wings; the wind seemed to carry the words right to their ears. "We're out of bombs-"

"We don't need bombs!" Sokka jerked a thumb back toward tattered gasbags. "All they need is one more push!" He held the reins one-handed, sketching the flight path in the air the way he'd seen Aang do before the gliders had first driven the Fire Nation off their mountain. "What do you think?"

Teo nodded, and wagged his wings to gather the few gliders still flying into formation. "I think you'd better take the lead. Appa pulls a *lot* of air!"

"Yeah, he does!" Grinning, Sokka guided the sky bison around, watching wings fan out at the corners of his vision.

"What are we *doing*?" Suki looked at him, and the airships, and the blood-glittering sea beyond the arc of Asagitatsu's harbor. "They *sail* the wind. Like ships! We're going to be fighting the land breeze-"

"And we've got a whole volcano to do it with!" Sokka clenched a fist, feeling the hot air funneling up and in front of them like the mother of all dust-devils. "Push 'em into the sea, guys!"

They were a tsunami of air. An avalanche of steam. And nothing could stand against them.

"This changes nothing!"

"I don't know; I kind of think it changes *everything*." Aang took a deep breath, and drew himself up in Master Gyatso's best laying-down-the-law sternness. "Asagitatsu's not going to blow. The Fire Nation isn't going to burn down the world. And the rest of the world isn't going to wipe out every firebender. I'm going to make sure of it."

Ape-lips pulled back in a fanged snarl. "Whatever you may claim for the World Spirit, there's no way you can stop human revenge." Clawed legs flexed, reaching spider-slow toward him. "*Little Avatar...*"

"Yes, there is." Aang covered his fist with his palm; bowing as a Temple Elder would, to pass on unpleasant news. "The world's been out of balance a long time. I can't fix all of it now. Maybe it'll take my whole life. But there are two things I *can* fix. Kyoshi's decree is *over*! Anyone born of Fire can give their loyalty wherever they choose to! And you..." Aang straightened, fixing the Face-Stealer with his best Wang Fire glare, and never mind if that was *showing emotion*. He was the Avatar, and for once the World-Spirit was going to get off its spiritual duff and act like a *teacher*. "You are going to *go to your room*!"

In a sulfur-cloud of black smoke, Koh fell.

Out of cinders, blue scales gleamed. Claws reached. Stone rattled.

"I knew you'd come out somewhere."

Wings rustled under the ash, struggling to gain room to fly-

"Eleven hundred years." The young yāorén looked down on his enemy with ancient eyes. "No more murders in the dark. Ever again."

Langxue reached out to steamy wind, and struck.

Chapter End Notes

Zuko is a Reluctant Hero; Aang is The Messiah. That means Aang gets to save the world.

Zuko just gets to save his part of it.

...And darn it, if the Messiah doesn't believe in violence, he should find a way to save the world *without using violence*. And yes, that does include not beating up the leader of the bad guys. Even if he doesn't kill them.

Chapter 91

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Smoke hazed the horizon, as it had for days. Hakoda could taste it as his ships edged past ever-burning fires and the occasional bit of wreckage to ease through the throat of the harbor. *Looks like the stone dock came out the worst*, he thought, raising his spyglass to eye cracked and seared rock crumbling in various precarious places. *I would have thought the wood would fare worse, but somehow they fire-proofed it... Oooof.*

The glass let him focus on *Suzuran's* scarred side; he had to shake his head that the ship was still afloat. "What happened to them?"

"Fire and ice." Iroh settled his hands deeper in red sleeves, eyes haunted. "I have seen such wounds before, on ships of old."

"Ozai didn't send everybody to the North." Aang bit his lip, and gripped the railing a little harder. "You're sure we can anchor out here, away from the dock? I know ships drift a little, and there are all these fires..."

"There are a lot of them." Hakoda took another look across the stretch of water he'd picked as an anchorage. "But they're predictable. We'll have enough room."

"Good. Because... I'm not going on shore."

Iroh sighed. "Aang. The war is over-"

"This doesn't have anything to do with the war." Aang squinted past him toward the charred and green slopes, shaking his head. "I beat Koh by telling him I was going to fix things. And if I'm going to fix things between the Fire Nation and everybody else, I need to make sure people keep their promises. And that means I have to keep mine. Zuko doesn't want me in his domain. I'm staying out of it." He let out a slow breath, ruffling the water. "But if you could give him my regards... oh, heck, I don't even *know* the right Fire Nation way to say that. Just - he wants me out, I'm out. I just want to know if everybody's okay..." He brightened, as a shadow moved with the wind. "Appa! Down here, buddy!"

Hakoda shaded his eyes to study the full saddle, and chuckled. "Looks like you'll know soon enough."

"Ooo, why does war have to be so messy!" Fuming, Suyin dunked yet another tunic into the washtub. Shook soapy water off her hands, and heaved a sigh. "Okay, go for it."

Jia rubbed her palms against each other, back and forth. In the tub, a shaped stone spire moved to her will, sloshing water and cloth in a steady motion.

Suyin grinned, and set to work checking through the next load for any spots that needed a little extra soap. *No more scrubbing and scrubbing and scrubbing. This is the best idea ever.*

Jinhai flopped down by their garden wall; up, but not shaped and pretty yet, in the wake of putting too many buildings back together. "I'm *bored*."

"So am I," Jia said happily. "No volcanic rumbles under us, no airships over us, no emergencies in the healing wing, no restless spirits swarming up out of the sea to attack us. Everything's very, *very* boring."

Jinhai scowled at both of them, and rolled his eyes. "...Girls are *so weird*."

"Yeah?" Suyin dried off her hands, and picked up the little pile of leather she'd left safely off to one side. One pouch of fern-spore powder to strap to her forearm, under her sleeve. One pair of metal thimbles, for thumb and forefinger.

Snap.

Puffs of flame, close enough to make her bratty little brother scramble backward.

Suyin grinned. "So how boring is this?"

Jinhai picked his jaw off the ground. "...How'd you do that?"

"Maybe if you ask Mom nicely, she'll tell you." Suyin winked. "Now, how about some hints on how to make this look like firebending, little brother?"

Maybe the war *was* over. The Avatar was out in the harbor, and nobody was shooting at each other, so with luck it was. But in case somebody hadn't gotten the word...

Anybody who comes after my little brother, has to go through me first.

"Go to your room? Seriously?" Sokka scratched at his hair, watching Aang get buried under hugs. Even Suki got in on the action, grinning like the sun rising. And there was *something* rattling in a shadowed corner near the railing; maybe hidden in a coiled hawser, even though anything that could be that loud shouldn't *fit*.

Sokka wasn't going to look that way too hard. No sense asking for trouble.

"It worked on *me*," Aang grinned. "I thought, why not?" His brows scrunched down. "I'm going to have to go into the Spirit World and visit him once in a while."

"*Whaaaat?*"

...Yep. By the way Sokka's ears were ringing, he wasn't the only one who'd yelled that.

"You don't act like somebody's teacher and then go off and leave them." Aang worked his airstaff around and around in his grip as if someone had carved on the secrets of the universe when he wasn't looking. "If the World Spirit's his parent, then..." The tips of his ears reddened. "Sometimes, when you steal apples out of the orchards, or go out riding after dark - it's because you want to be sure someone's paying attention. And - at least since Kuruk went looking for his wife - the Avatars *haven't*."

Sokka traded a glance with his sister and girlfriend, and saw Toph clap a hand to her forehead in pure disbelief. "Um. Aang," he said warily. "I know you think somebody ought to feel responsible for this, but..."

"What he's trying to say is, be *careful*." Katara touched his hand, just above white knuckles. "You just had a big fight with him, right? Then you need to give him some time to calm down and think it over anyway. So get some rest first. *Then* think about when you should go talk to him again."

Aang's shoulders drooped. "I wanted to talk to him..."

"How about spirit-letters?" Suki put in. "I... well, I don't write them a lot, but every year... you write them for everyone who's passed on, and burn them to send them to the spirit world. Do you think that would work?"

"Huh." The airbender chewed his lip. "But he wouldn't be able to write back. And I want him to *understand*."

"You can't *make* people understand anything," Toph shrugged. "Just look at Sparky. He had to beat his head against a stone wall forever before he started figuring things out."

"He sent you a message," Sokka stuck in, while Aang was chewing on that unwelcome fact. "They got most of the pressure out of Asagitatsu. He's not making any promises about walking on shore, but he's pretty sure as long as you don't do anything noisy, the volcano's going to ignore you."

Aang whistled, shoulders thrown back in relief. "Well, *that's* something. I was worried I was going to have to get off the ship, so Chief Hakoda and everybody would be okay." He grinned. "He sent a message? Awesome! Who knows? Maybe if I'm good enough at keeping a promise, Zuko and I can be friends again!"

Toph poked their airbending buddy with one small finger. "*Again* kind of implies you were friends *before*."

"Well..."

Eh, it'd been a long year for all of them. Aang had earned a rescue. "Who knows?" Sokka shrugged. "War's over. Anything could happen."

"Er, let me be sure I understand this correctly." A bit dazed, Earth King Kuei adjusted his glasses. "You want Master Sergeant Yakume to *stay*?"

Behind him, he could almost feel Agent Bon's carefully hidden amusement. Eshe wasn't even trying to hide her smile, gray eyes dancing as a Lower Ring Guard captain crossed his arms stubbornly - then caught himself, and sketched an awkward, unpracticed bow. "Yes, sir. Your majesty. The Guard's still short-handed and the citizens are cranky and there's no way we're getting the Fire Army out of here in a hurry even if Captain Taka *does* have orders. We need somebody attached to the Guard who can break Fire Nation heads *legally*." An Lu-shan cleared his throat. "Besides. We've got almost enough evidence to nail a bunch of smugglers who've been weighting their flour sacks with lead, and I want to *catch* these bastards. Um. Sir."

The Fire Army soldier was almost smoldering in his armor, knee flexed to take some of the weight off a healed leg. "Don't I get a say in this?"

Captain Lu-shan tried to look innocent. "What, you don't want to catch them?"

"That's not the point!"

Safely out of range of a kick, one of Lu-shan's street guards sighed. "Squadroom's just not the same without Huojin," Officer Yaoju said regretfully. "Your temper's *almost* as bad, though."

Majestic, Kuei told himself. He had to look majestic. Even if he did want to snicker. "I understand you're from Onsenzakura, Master Sergeant?"

That drew an even darker scowl. "Yes?"

"As I understand the maps, your colony is reasonably close to Dragons' Wings, by the sea route," Kuei said thoughtfully. "Ba Sing Se wants to keep close ties to our relatives there, and to the Northern Air Temple gliders. If we could establish friendly ties to people along the way... I think there's going to be a lot of trade going both ways in a few years."

"Wouldn't know anything about that," Yakume said bluntly. "I'm just a soldier."

"A soldier who's done his best to adhere to the letter and spirit of the law he was charged to enforce. Despite a lot of death on both sides." Kuei folded his hands. *No giggling*, he told himself sternly. "As it happens, your Captain Taka already provided a list of personnel to help... manage the withdrawal. You and Captain Sanya are on my agents' short list of Fire soldiers we can trust to handle the job. If the Guards of the Lower Ring are willing to put up with you, I'd be happy if you honored their trust." He smiled, just a little rueful. "Or I can have you shipped back to the Fire Army lines in a block with a chisel. A *very small* chisel."

Silence. For a moment Kuei's heart clenched; hundreds of them had sworn to him, but maybe he didn't know Fire people at all-

A snort of laughter, and Yakume shook his head. "Maybe you can hold this city after all." He inclined his head. "Good luck, your majesty. I'll try to be one less headache for you." He cut a glance at Lu-shan. "Though I can't speak for the captain."

Lu-shan sketched a quick bow to his king, and hared after the man. "Since when am *I a headache*, you cranky little fish-gnawer?"

"Since always, noodle-slurper..."

Eshe's smile was warm. "Should we invite them to the wedding, my bear-friend?"

Kuei covered a chuckle. "I think that might be too much for a simple soldier."

"Just a soldier," Agent Bon muttered. "*Sure* he is."

Kuei glanced at his betrothed, and matched her raised eyebrow.

"A simple soldier who reads Earth Kingdom law, and argues it well enough the magistrates even listen," the Dai Li shrugged. "He'll tell anyone in earshot he doesn't *like* us - but how many people do you know who study *Fire Nation* law?"

"I do," Kuei murmured, a bit lost.

"...Of course you do. Well." Bon coughed. "At least the Fire Nation is in as much of a mess as we are."

The message was written on plain military paper; not a messenger-hawk's silk or formal parchment. But the precise strokes and careful wording were a dead give-away to anyone who'd suffered through royal tutors' head-pounding efforts at education... and a stark contrast to the quick scrawls of fire-writing appearing in the heat of the flames around the Dragon Throne.

Zuko, Lord of Dragon's Wings, congratulates Lord Azula...

Zuko, Lord of Dragons' Wings, congratulates Lord Azula of Caldera City on her ascension to the Dragon Throne.

(Better you than me!)

I have been reliably informed that Avatar Kyoshi's decree binding great names to the Fire Lord has been lifted. From past experience, descriptions of events in Ba Sing Se, and information gained on the current status of the onmitsu, I have every confidence that you will be able to hold the loyalty of every lord willing to join you. I am also certain that you possess the necessary calm judgment, canniness, and swift ruthlessness of action to keep the rest on their toes.

(Make 'em sweat. They deserve every minute of it.)

You may wish to review Yamanoue no Okura's *Ten Thousand Leaves*. I know, poetry, meh. But there are some interesting bits in there on distinguishing *punishment* from *consequences*. One of them only motivates people for a little while. The other may actually work, long-term, to change their behavior.

(Also, try counting to ten. Backwards. Before you fry things. Anticipation makes frying things better, anyway.)

My domain is currently rebuilding from a mostly contained eruption and battle damage.

(Ask Grandfather for details on Shirotona in a Bad Mood.)

We are currently consulting with the heir of Shu Jing to establish necessary assistance from our allies. I anticipate that some aid from Byakko might be forthcoming if ships currently assigned to the blockade chose to ignore vessels flying certain flags. A repositioning of the blockade might be advisable in any event, given the current strategic situation.

(Aang's not interested in searing the Fire Nation down to the bedrock. And I think we've killed off the real firebrands among the Earth Generals, so he ought to be able to stand his ground with a little help. Think about it.

And no, I didn't say who Shu Jing's heir was. I suspect that's going to be complicated.

Besides, I know you'll get a laugh once you figure it out. I'm not going to spoil your fun.)

It will be some time before we will be in a position to offer coronation gifts suitable to your strength and bloodline. In the interim, I can only offer the gift of counsel. Take it as you will.

I understand you're looking for a consort. Healer's advice: don't worry about firebending strength. Look for a family history of mental stability. And *never tell me the details*.

(And if a prospective consort's family has a closet full of puppets? Do what you do best.)

"Never tell me the details?" Azula scowled at the paper. "What details?"

Mai raised a skeptical brow.

"...Those details?" Azula shuddered.

"I think we're going to have some long talks with your mother," Mai murmured.

"Mother." Azula looked away. "What am I going to tell him?"

"I'd tell him the truth," Mai said bluntly.

Now Azula raised an eyebrow.

"...We'll do a few drafts, first."

We really did it. Toph wriggled her toes in volcanic dirt, feeling the heat radiating from the ground and air around this one of many, many tiny flame-vents around the caldera. A nice, gentle heat, with earth and rock twitching a little, like a pygmy puma in its sleep. But just twitching. Not the cranky, steam-rattling-pressure-gauges fury Asagitatsu had held just a month before. *One volcano, curled up and snoozing. Awesome.*

"Dad, did you know the guy who takes care of *Suzuran's* hawks is from Shu Jing?" Sokka's voice floated over to where Toph was poking at the vent. "That's... wow. I could tell him stuff about his home town, when he hasn't been home in *years* to see it himself."

Chief Hakoda chuckled; Toph thought it sounded a little homesick. "Sounds like hearing about the ice down south from the army."

"There's a couple people here who probably could tell you a little, yeah," Sokka admitted. "Though Zuko didn't stick around too long- where are you going with that?"

Katara shifted under a heavy weight; pottery jars, from the feel of them. "Asiavik says Yugoda wants Amaya to have these."

"More healing supplies?" Suki whistled. "I thought everyone was getting better."

Katara cleared her throat. "Actually... he said something about seal jerky, weird cravings, and making sure Iroh stays alive."

"Oh?" Suki must have seen something Toph couldn't read through the dirt; she stifled a snicker. "*Oh.*"

Sokka took a wary step back. "Huh?"

She was with Sokka on this one, Toph thought. What was *that* all about?

"Son," Hakoda said, in the tones of a man about to walk over hot coals, "you're getting to the age where a man needs to know a few things. Before he finds out the hard way."

From the drag of Sokka's heels as the two men headed off, Hakoda's grip on his shoulder wasn't taking no for an answer. "...I am so going to wish I didn't ask, right?"

Silent footsteps came up in their wake, visible by the weight of metal around them. And the snickering.

Toph poked a finger toward armor. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, just wondering how the Water Tribe version of the Talk goes," Teruko smirked. "Probably a little less dangling over open volcanoes from a shovel, and more upset brothers on ice floes in the middle of the night."

"We usually use a harpoon," Katara snickered. "Though, Gran-Gran always said to save that part for when things... well, get a little more serious." She turned, and tapped one hand near her waterskin. "You are serious about my brother, right?"

"Yeah." Suki sounded just a little surprised. "Yeah, I think I am. He's a warrior, and he's brave... and he's *funny*." She patted the fan in her belt. "My old aunties always said, look for a guy who can laugh at himself. That'll get you through more tough spots than a sword."

"Yeah, it will," Katara said, half to herself. "Spirits don't care about swords."

"Huh. Well, if you are serious about chasing that airbender, you might want to get that story in early," Teruko said practically. "He needs things repeated a few times." She snorted. "Not that different from a singed young recruit, I guess. He doesn't know what he doesn't know."

"Speaking of knowing..." Toph rubbed her chin between thumb and forefinger, trying to look as evil as possible. "I've got a bargain for you, Fingernails."

"Uh-oh," Suki said under her breath.

"Oh, this should be good," Katara snickered.

Teruko shifted her weight as she glanced between them, then focused back on Toph. "What kind of deal?"

"Well..." Toph rubbed her hands together. "I'll do the strap-him-to-a-rolling-boulder version for one Dai Li guy, when you get ready to chase him."

"And?" Teruko ventured.

"When I'm old enough, you point me at some good sake," Toph said firmly. "I've got some ideas for a cord that won't burn, and I'm going to need somebody who can make sure it's red..."

"One of these days," Saoluan muttered, going at her little brother's singed hair with scissors as the three of them sat on his favorite ledge, "you're going to have to tell everybody the story. Tracking down a centuries-old dragon; you're got the *best* drinking story and you don't even *drink*-"

"Ahhhchoo!"

"Ack!" Langxue ducked behind a shield of ice, almost stabbing himself on her scissors. "Watch it!"

Agent Shirong blinked blearily. Sniffled, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Was that... sparks?"

Still holding trimmed bits of hair, Saoluan waved the charred ends his way. "Somebody's *plotting* about you."

"Plotting?" Shirong sat up, instantly alert. "If you know about some kind of conspiracy-"

Saoluan almost stuck her tongue out at him. "Not that kind of plot." *Hmm. If somebody finally has made up their mind to go after you... wonder if I can help?*

"You've got that evil look on your face again," Langxue deadpanned.

"Me? Evil?"

One brow raised, Langxue flicked ice with his fingers, shattering it into drifting flakes he collected with a sweep of his hand. Formed two loose snowballs, and handed one to Shirong. "Here. This should make it a fair fight."

Hefted the other, and gave his big sister a *considering* look.

"Hey!"

Ah, the sound of yelping in the wind. Zuko smirked a little as he leaned back on one of Amaya's garden benches, watching sunlight play through the water in the rebuilt fountain, wondering who'd fallen afoul of Asahi's temper this time.

"My old bones... the wounds of war are always such a trial to mend." Iroh stretched his back with an audible pop, then settled himself on the opposite end of the bench. "One would think you might wish to corral her more thoroughly."

"When the rattle-vipers learn to stop coming into town, maybe," Zuko shrugged, folding the letter in his hand. "Better if she's the one who bites people. Asahi's not venomous."

Iroh chuckled. "Some might say otherwise." He folded his hands in his sleeves. "A letter from our new Fire Lord?"

Oh, this was going to be tricky. "From the Lord of Caldera City," Zuko stated. "She left off most of her titles." Which was an *interesting* balancing act.

"Hmm." From that twitch of white brows, Iroh was calculating some of the same political considerations he had. "Which allows her to address you as an honorable enemy, or even a potential ally, rather than a rebel domain."

"I don't think she knows what's going to be most advantageous yet," Zuko nodded. "So she's keeping her options open."

Iroh stroked his beard. "She means to be flexible, then? We have not seen that in a Fire Lord in... quite some time."

"Since Kyoshi," Zuko murmured.

"I would not go quite so far..."

"Let's just hope it works." Zuko eyed the paper, trying not to feel a twinge of envy. "She's offering Byakko passes through the blockade for time with Grandfather."

"Er..."

Zuko waved the paper. "*The Lord of Caldera City requests that Lady Kotone of Byakko provide access to the valued council of the legendary swordsman and information-gatherer Shidan of Byakko, for our domains' mutual benefit and stability,*" he stated, in his best court-formal tones. And had to chuckle, despite himself. "In other words, let me talk to Grandfather, and let's find some way to do it that won't get too many people killed. Except the idiots. Who needs the idiots anyway?"

Iroh blinked. "...Oh dear."

"He must think she's better," Zuko said, half to himself. "Maybe it wasn't an act, at Boiling Rock. Maybe she can figure out how to care about people. That would be good." He let out a slow breath. "That would be really good."

"It would, indeed," Iroh said gently. "It is good to be able to care about one's family."

"I'm still sending armed ambassadors, when we get that far. It'll make her feel better if they can

snarl back." Zuko gave his uncle a wry look. "What do you think about Jia Wen?"

For a moment, Iroh looked very disconcerted indeed. "She is... young."

"I wouldn't send her *alone*," Zuko said grumpily. "She *is* young. But she's got great manners, she knows how to keep her thoughts behind a smile, and she's the only earthbender I've *ever* heard of who got the drop on Azula. And did it when she was scared stiff. My sister's going to respect that."

"And above all, dragons wish the respect they have earned," Iroh mused. "Even the young ones." He stroked his beard again, looking into the distance. "Your sister appears to have discovered some scruples; something I was not certain my brother's daughter could do. And you, too, have grown, since you first warned me of heating river-rocks. You have become more willing to speak out, in defense of yourself and others."

"Asagitatsu's a really big rock," Zuko said wryly. "I don't know where we'd find enough charcoal to pack around her." He took a deep breath. This hurt. Not as much as finding out from Azula that their mother was in the Fire Nation, and had no intention of leaving, but it still stung. "You were right about the Fire Lord attacking the Northern Tribe."

"Gracious of you." Iroh smiled, just a little. "Right, and wrong. There is no fool like an old fool. I have spent so much time attempting to discern the spirits' will for the future, I sometimes forget the world here and now. A fault I shall have to remedy, to be a proper husband to your aunt."

"I'm sure Master Amaya will appreciate that," Zuko said warily. *What now?*

"Master?" Iroh waved a scolding finger. "Is that any way to refer to the mother of your cousin to be?"

...What?

He couldn't have heard that. He *could not* have heard that.

And what was he doing on the ground, anyway?

"Oh dear," Iroh sighed.

"Iroh!" Amaya's voice, as if from a distance. "What did you tell him?"

"Er... the good news?"

A rueful sigh, and Zuko heard her robes swish toward him. "You do realize that ever since your disastrous ferry ride into Ba Sing Se, he's been studying up on everything that can go wrong with a pregnancy?"

"Gnmph," Zuko grumbled, waving a hand in protest.

"I'll be *fine*." Amaya crouched down by him. "I'm a healer, we have other healers and midwives in the settlement, and you're nearly ready to move out of apprenticeship yourself-"

"Arghggsnf!" *No, no, no! Don't you dare make this my mastery test!*

"It'll be fine." Warm fingers carded through his hair. "You'll see. Everything will be fine."

Oh, no. Zuko closed his eyes, and tried not to groan. *You just had to say that...*

-The End.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, that's it. I have other ideas for things that might happen down the road in this AU, including a certain group of interstellar explorers wandering through a big stone ring down in the ruins, but this is the end of the story I wanted to tell.

...Yes, one of those big stone rings. I know people have guessed it.

(And in case anyone's wondering, Amaya has twin girls.)

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